**Whatever happened to ethics?**

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While the question of corruption is one that continues to stalk the country today, the Toshakhana affair and the alleged sale of a watch taken from the state gift repository by Imran Khan – currently making headlines and dominating the news – is also an issue of ethics.

Ethics seems to be a simple matter, but it is fairly complicated in real terms. For the Toshakhana affair, for example, we need to look a little beyond the law, the rules, and the regulations that have been put down in writing and also at the ethics of our leaders and the manner in which they act.

From an ethical point of view, it is clear that purchasing a gift item, given by the leader of a country with which Pakistan has long-term ties, from the repository and then selling it at a much higher price than what was paid to obtain the watch is both unethical and discourteous. The details of the case are still being disputed. But if the watch was indeed sold in the manner that has been suggested, there are aspects to this which go beyond that of corruption.

When leaders act in an unethical manner, they set examples that others, including junior leaders of political parties, in the country follow. We have already seen a decline in ethics in our country. Most people say it began after the 1960s and 1970s as corruption gradually seeped into bureaucracy and many other places. Besides corruption, we have also seen a rapid decline in ethics and manners.

We can witness this moral degeneration in not only offices but also education institutions where students have no qualms about cheating and carrying out dishonest acts to get better marks in exams and tests. There was a time in the country when this would not happen and when professors at top universities would not accept plagiarized theses or publish content plagiarized from books originally published by writers across the globe.

Lack of ethics also affects other aspects of life and the quality of life people lead. All of us may have had doubts about the work carried out by say, automobile mechanics or others working at home or other settings. We also see work done to construct or repair roads and how contractors show lack of ethics when procuring materials. As a result, such constructions are rarely satisfactory and fail to withstand the damage caused by nature and heavy vehicular use for at least a few decades.

In Germany, the Autobahn – or motorways – last for years without major problems. In our country, roads collapse every few years, leading to frequent repair work. Even the motorway itself is frequently under repair with signs marking where construction work is underway. We wonder if this is simply a result of unethical practices carried out when the road was being constructed.

The same lack of ethics affects our political environment and the electoral process as well as other factors surrounding these. For example, every candidate contesting a general election will admit that their campaign spending is more than the amount specified by the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP). Most claim it is simply not possible to conduct a viable campaign within the amount set by the ECP. We need to consider what to do about this and how to allow people who do not have big bank accounts to enter electoral races.

The law states that every individual has the right to contest a general election or to apply to any position in the country’s political sphere. In reality, it is not possible to implement this law. Many unethical deeds form a part for every election ranging from stuffing ballot boxes to creating lists or cutting out the names from these lists to try and secure a victory.

The examples set by leaders also affect other aspects of life and all that goes with it. If Imran Khan can engage in unethical behaviour, ordinary people on the street, milk sellers who mix water in milk, merchants who add water to dilute liquids they sell or butchers who inject weak animals with water to make them look heavier and healthier, and others will have an excuse for engaging in such acts. They can always say they are only imitating the leader and the man who was elected to the top position in the country by the people. We wonder if people are even aware of this or if this will be a consideration in the next election.

What is true is that along with the issue of corruption and wrongdoings, we need to look at ethics and practices of ordinary people. Ethics should be part of school curricula. This addition is as important as ensuring that education standards are universal across the country or that all children are taught at the same level. This may be the only way in which we can create a more ethical and just environment in the country.

We need to create a society where children are taught to be more honest than the generation that came before them. At the moment, this is simply not true. The elderly in the country are often more aware of ethical behaviour than their children and, in most cases, more so than their grandchildren. Our leaders have set terrible examples. Top economists and analysts have noted that corruption and unethical behaviour at the top trickles down to the people creating problems in society, which are not easy to resolve.

We need to take steps to create a more ethical place. Of course, we have examples of hotel staff who returned money left by tourists or cab and taxi drivers who brought back phones left in their vehicles. These individuals need to be admired especially since they come from a society where such behaviours are not common.

But at the same time, we need to remember that in many societies, such actions would be the norm, not the exception. It is this norm towards which we need to move. And this can happen only if our leaders at the top of the pyramid set the right examples and ensure that we are not constantly inundated by scandals that have hit us constantly over the years and continue to make the news today as we engage in our quest to understand the actions of politicians and what they achieve through their deeds.

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