

Supreme Court Judgements on Ethical Values and Reforms in Public Services

The Supreme Court of India has delivered several landmark judgments that reinforce ethical values, integrity, and accountability as fundamental to public service and have driven significant administrative reforms. These rulings emphasize that public office is a public trust and that public servants must act in the public interest with fairness and impartiality. **Key Supreme Court judgments and the ethical values/reforms they address include:**

Upholding Ethical Values and Accountability

- 1. E.P. Royappa v. State of Tamil Nadu (1974):** While a service matter case, it introduced the crucial doctrine that "equality is antithetical to arbitrariness". This principle has been widely applied to scrutinize arbitrary state actions, including appointments, transfers, and disciplinary actions in public services, ensuring fairness and non-discrimination.
- 2. S.R. Bommai v. Union of India (1994):** This judgment, while primarily about the misuse of Article 356 (President's Rule), reinforced constitutional morality and the rule of law in governance. It curbed the arbitrary use of power by the executive, which indirectly pushes for a more ethical and constitutionally compliant administration.
- 3. Vineet Narain v. Union of India (1998):** This judgment is a cornerstone for ensuring institutional integrity, especially in anti-corruption bodies. The Court laid down extensive guidelines to ensure that investigating agencies (like the CBI and Enforcement Directorate) function free from political interference. It mandated a fixed tenure for the CBI Director and CVC, reinforcing their independence and ability to act against corruption without bias.
- 4. In Re: Mehar Singh Saini (2010):** The Court ordered the removal of the Chairman and members of the Haryana Public Service Commission (HPSC) due to systemic corruption, including manipulation of examination scores and acceptance of falsified certificates. This ruling reinforced the necessity of integrity and impartiality in constitutional bodies responsible for public recruitment to maintain public trust in the administrative machinery.
- 5. Centre For PIL v. Union of India (2011):** In this case, the Supreme Court quashed the appointment of P.J. Thomas as the Central Vigilance Commissioner (CVC) due to pending corruption charges against him. The Court emphasized that

institutional integrity is paramount and that individuals appointed to high public offices, particularly those overseeing anti-corruption, must be beyond reproach and uphold the highest ethical standards.

- 6. T.S.R. Subramanian v. Union of India (2013):** This landmark judgment addressed the need for stability and ethical conduct in the civil services. The Court directed that officers of the All India Services and other civil servants are not bound to follow oral directives that undermine their credibility or are contrary to the law. The ruling emphasized the importance of a fixed minimum tenure to protect honest officers from arbitrary transfers and political interference, thereby fostering an environment where civil servants can act impartially and ethically.
- 7. Sachin Kumar v. Delhi Subordinate Service Selection Board (DSSSB) (2021):** The Supreme Court upheld the cancellation of an entire recruitment process due to widespread irregularities and systemic fraud. The judgment underscored that the sanctity of the public recruitment process is inviolable and that the state has a constitutional mandate (Articles 14 and 16) to ensure fairness, transparency, and equal opportunity in public employment.

Mandating Administrative

- 1. Prakash Singh v. Union of India (2006):** Recognizing the need for police reforms to ensure the police force is professional and accountable, the Court issued several directives. Key reforms included the establishment of State and District-level Police Complaints Authorities to inquire into public complaints of serious misconduct, thus providing an independent accountability mechanism.
- 2. Union of India v. Ramesh Gelli (2016):** The Court held that officers of private banks could be considered 'public servants' under the Prevention of Corruption Act, 1988, in cases of professional misconduct. This widened the scope of anti-corruption law, ensuring greater accountability in the banking sector and deterring commercial bribery.
- 3. T.N. Seshan, former Chief Election Commissioner of India:** While not a single specific case, the Supreme Court consistently backed his efforts to enforce the Election Commission's mandate for free and fair elections. His actions highlighted the importance of an independent, impartial, and decisive public servant who can enforce the rule of law despite political pressure.

General Principles for Public Service Reforms

The judiciary has consistently reinforced the following ethical values and reform principles through various judgments:

- 1. Constitutional Morality:** The Court has consistently held that public officials must adhere to the core principles of constitutional democracy, including individual liberty, equality, and dignity, which should prevail over societal prejudices.
- 2. Transparency and Accountability:** Judgments have highlighted the importance of the Right to Information Act and judicial review as mechanisms to ensure accountability. Public authorities are expected to provide reasoned decision-making and act transparently.
- 3. Rule of Law:** The Court mandates that all public servants must comply with judicial orders and statutory provisions, and deliberate disobedience can lead to contempt of court and personal liability.
- 4. Protection of Honest Officers:** In recent observations (August 2025), the Supreme Court noted that honest officers must be protected, acknowledging the challenges in the anti-corruption legal framework and the need for a balanced approach that encourages honest decision-making.

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