Ethical Erosion in Public Administration: A Study on Corruption Trends and Governance Challenges in Bihar

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ABSTRACT

Ethics, defined as a system to discern right from wrong, serves as the cornerstone of governance systems designed to safeguard public and national interests. Ethical principles such as honesty, accountability, and integrity ensure public servants act in society's best interests, promoting transparency and building trust between governments and citizens. However, in developing nations like India, the erosion of ethical values among public servants—termed "ethical absenteeism"—has emerged as a critical issue, undermining institutional efficiency, propagating social injustice, and adversely affecting millions.

The element of bureaucracy as impersonal behavior, set pattern of law, specific rule and hierarchy and division of labour. These element is most useful for the governance and implement public policy objective to the last man of the country. Ethical value is diminish and many tool and technique used for the smooth functioning of the bureaucracy.

This study explores the phenomenon of ethical absenteeism in public administration with a focus on Bihar. Ethical absenteeism refers to the gradual erosion or lack of ethical values among public officials, leading to systemic corruption, governance inefficiencies, and public distrust. Using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, this research examines the key drivers behind the decline in ethical standards, the evolution of corruption trends, and the resultant challenges in governance. The findings highlight the critical need for reforms in ethical training, institutional accountability, and policy measures to restore public trust and improve governance quality.

Keywords: Ethical absenteeism, corruption, governance challenges, ethical erosion, public administration.

1. Introduction

Ethics serves as the foundation of a system of governance that works in public interest and national interest. The principles of honesty, accountability and integrity ensure that public servants work in the best interest of society, maintain transparency and promote trust between the government and its citizens. Ethical values are fundamental principles that guide the conduct of individuals and institutions. In the context of governance, these values encompass integrity, accountability, transparency, and public service. They are essential for fostering trust between the government and its citizens, which is crucial for effective governance and social stability. However, the erosion of ethical values among public servants, which can be referred to as moral absence, has become a widespread issue in developing countries like India. This phenomenon is not only weakening institutional efficiency but also promoting social injustice, negatively affecting the lives of millions of people.

Today, ethical absenteeism can be seen in most of the public servants. The result of increasing moral absence among public servants can be seen in the form of unethical behavior like corruption, nepotism, favoritism and dereliction of duty. When public servants prioritize personal gain over their social obligations, it results in abuse of power, loss of public confidence, and damage to governance systems.

2. Importance of Ethics in Public Administration

Ethics plays a vital role in the functioning of public institutions. Public servants are expected to act as custodians of public resources and decision makers for policies affecting society. Their actions should reflect the collective values of fairness, impartiality and accountability so as to build a just society. Ethical conduct ensures -

• Trust in government - Citizens' trust in government institutions is very closely linked to the ethical behaviour of public servants. When corruption becomes a norm, trust declines sharply.

• Efficient use of resources - Ethical governance ensures judicious use of resources for public welfare, thereby minimising wastage and exploitation.

• Social justice - Ethics is essential for equitable service delivery, especially in societies where socio-economic inequalities are high.

• Policy Implementation - Successful implementation of policies requires ethical commitment, as misconduct can derail even the most well-conceived programs.

3. Administrative reforms and Declining public service performance

Bureaucracy are intended to serve the state, but the state machinery itself is becoming increasingly ineffective and deteriorated. In several northern Indian states, alternate power structures and mafia gangs have risen, challenging the authority of the government. Consequently, it is unsurprising that the bureaucracy is also in a state of disarray. There is now a deeper social and functional alignment between bureaucracy and the politicians of these states. Many public servants are actively involved in partisan politics—they are consumed by it, influenced by it, and even participate in it both individually and collectively. While this alignment is unfortunate, it is somewhat inevitable because the will of the state (embodied by politicians) and its execution (carried out by administrators) cannot remain misaligned for long.

Simply put, expecting politicians to continue being casteist, corrupt, and supportive of criminal elements while public servants remain honest, responsive, and agents of change is unrealistic. Over time, the values of the political and administrative systems inevitably converge. Organizational theories differentiate between healthy and unhealthy systems. Healthy organizations define their goals clearly, share them among all members, and maintain a consistent and focused drive toward achieving them. They encourage pragmatic problem-solving, open challenges to leadership ideas, teamwork, and shared responsibility. They respect the judgment of junior members and allow minor mistakes as part of growth. Such organizations balance order with innovation, set performance standards, and discourage mediocrity, ensuring that individuals either contribute or step aside. A sense of belonging is tied to the organization's success, making members integral to its achievements.

In contrast, government organizations rarely articulate clear goals. When they do, these goals are often expressed in vague and lofty terms, more like aspirations than actionable objectives. This deliberate lack of clarity fosters detachment among officers, as they are neither aware of nor committed to the organization's goals due to the absence of transparency. Seeking or offering help is seen as a weakness, and accountability for failures tends to diminish with seniority. Politicians' oral orders often override written directives, further undermining the system.

When power is misused or weakly exercised, it is the poor—those with the least power—who suffer the most. Weak governance undermines the delivery of essential services and benefits to those who need them most. It enables powerful interest groups to influence policies, programs, and resource allocation in ways that disadvantage the poor. The absence of property rights, legal protection, and police services further marginalizes the poor, preventing them from claiming their rightful opportunities. As a result, poor governance not only perpetuates poverty but also obstructs efforts to alleviate it.

Improving governance is vital for uplifting the poor. Teachers, for instance, must be present and effective in classrooms, just as doctors and nurses must provide proper care to patients. However, these professions are often trapped in a system where incentives for quality service delivery are weak, and political favoritism dominates. Absenteeism among public servants is widespread but rarely measured. Skilled doctors avoid rural postings, and those who are posted there face little oversight, making penalties for neglect almost negligible. Even when present, professionals often mistreat the poor, exacerbating the cycle of inequality and poor governance.

India's higher public services recruitment process is designed to select the most talented individuals. However, over time, many public servants lose their enthusiasm and creativity, becoming unmotivated public servants with little belief in their ability to contribute to public welfare. The Indian bureaucracy suffers from long-standing issues such as excessive focus on rules over results, seniority-based promotions instead of merit, delays, and mediocrity, making the system rigid and slow to adapt to change. Political interference has further eroded professionalism in the public services, particularly among public servants, who are expected to lead at state and district levels.

A lack of professionalism and domain expertise is a significant weakness. public servants spend much of their time in implimenting roles but have little incentive to acquire the necessary skills or knowledge. This fosters both ignorance and arrogance. It is often noted that public servants prioritize personal convenience and hierarchy over learning or public service. Their limited opportunities outside government result in dependency on government positions, making them more prone to political manipulation. Over time, many officers become stagnant and focus on securing favorable postings rather than driving meaningful change. This stagnation highlights the urgent need for reforms to enhance professionalism, accountability, and effectiveness within the public services.

4. Absenteeism

A 2003 World Bank study highlighted that a significant portion of government spending in education and health goes toward salaries for teachers and health workers. However, rampant absenteeism among these professionals often results in the failure to deliver effective services. Governments appear to prioritize providing jobs over ensuring high-quality service delivery. Investigations in rural northern Indian states reveal a dire situation, with endemic teacher absenteeism. In one instance, a village school in Uttar Pradesh remained non-functional for a decade without public outcry. A 2008 World Bank study found teacher attendance in Uttar Pradesh to average 65%, but only 27% of them were actively engaged in teaching. During survey visits, no more than one-third of teachers were involved in teaching activities. Similarly, rural healthcare suffers from absenteeism, lack of supervision, and neglectful attitudes among medical staff. The Planning Commission's 2009 report described inadequate staff presence at Community Health Centres (CHCs), further exacerbating the crisis. These findings underscore systemic failures in service delivery, where resources exist primarily to sustain service providers rather than addressing the actual needs of the population. Ensuring accountability and active participation is critical to improving education and healthcare outcomes in rural India.

5. The Right to Public Services (RTPS) Act

The Right to Public Services (RTPS) Act, first enacted in Madhya Pradesh in 2010 and subsequently adopted by 10 other states under various names, seeks to enhance public service delivery. These states include Rajasthan, Delhi, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Jammu & Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Karnataka, and Jharkhand. The Act has five primary objectives: (a) ensuring the provision of services, (b) delivering services within a stipulated time frame, (c) holding designated officers accountable, (d) providing a two-stage grievance redressal system, and (e) imposing penalties for delays or denials of services.

Services under this Act vary across states, ranging from 15 in Uttar Pradesh to 124 in Rajasthan. These include regulatory (e.g., trade licenses), administrative (e.g., birth and caste certificates), basic (e.g., water and electricity), and welfare services (e.g., pensions and stipends). Encouragingly, many state governments have taken proactive steps to digitize service delivery, incorporating transparency and internal controls. For example, Karnataka offers 151 services through 800 Citizen Service Centres, which provide integrated services like certificates, pensions, and e-registration. Citizens can track the status of applications via the Sakala website, ensuring accountability.

Bihar has also demonstrated success by processing nearly 10 million service applications with a 98% disposal rate. Similarly, Madhya Pradesh has processed over 9 million applications efficiently. These examples highlight the commitment of state governments, amidst declining public trust in political and bureaucratic systems, to restore faith in governance.

Rights-based legislations like the RTPS Act aim to make public administration more people-centric and efficient. However, the extent to which these reforms truly benefit citizens remains to be evaluated. It is recommended that the Government of India (GOI) and state governments conduct concurrent assessments to measure public satisfaction with the quality, speed, and accessibility of these services.

6. Research Methodology

The phenomenon of ethical absenteeism, marked by corruption, nepotism, favoritism, and dereliction of duty, is pervasive among public servants in Bihar. Despite various anti-corruption measures such as the Vigilance Commission and the Economic Offences Unit, corruption remains entrenched, jeopardizing public welfare and governance effectiveness. The present paper aims to focus on the following issues as patterns and trends of ethical absenteeism in Bihar, identify systemic weaknesses contributing to the ethical decline among public servants and contribbutory reforms to strengthening institutional integrity, promoting ethical behavior, and reducing corruption in Bihar's governance systems.

Methodology Structure

Objectives	• What are the trends and patterns of ethical absenteeism among public servants in Bihar? • To identify systemic factors contribute to the decline of ethical values in governance? • What policy and administrative reforms are necessary to mitigate ethical absenteeism and enhance governance quality?
Data	The study is based mixed method approach combining quantittaive as well as qualitative data from the Vigilance department and economic offences unit.etc
Variables	No. of Incidence, cases reported and tools and technique for improving good governance.
Methodology And Tools	Trend Line, Bar Diagram, Histogram, Maximum, Minimum and Range, etc

7. Key Finding and Discussion

An analysis of Vigilance Department trap cases from 2006 to 2024 in Bihar reveals important insights into the pattern of ethical absence and systemic corruption. The findings are discussed below with the support of tables, graphs and diagrams, which demonstrate statistical trends, financial implications and departmental analysis.

1. Trends and Patterns in Corruption

The total number of cases reported annually highlights a fluctuating but consistently high level of corruption. The data shows that the number of cases varied across the years, but the total amount of bribes increased steadily, indicating an increase in both the frequency and scale of corruption.

Table 1: Trends of Total Trapped Public Servants, total bribe Money, Highest bribe money

Year	Total Trapped Public Servants	Total Bribe Money (inThousand Rupees)	Highest Bribe Money (₹)
2006	61	500.25	1,00,000
2007	103	834.1	1,28,000
2008	78	778.9	1,00,000
2009	78	1476.6	4,16,000
2010	65	603.3	50,000
2011	72	864.9	1,50,000
2012	48	1050.5	3,47,400
2013	47	900.9	1,50,000
2014	28	399	1,00,000
2015	48	1145.1	1,15,000
2016	113	2891.5	4,00,000
2017	86	1773.904	1,32,000
2018	39	3003.5	6,00,000
2019	32	4281	16,00,000
2020	20	822	1,00,000
2021	49	2562.3	8,00,000
2022	25	6100.751	45,00,000
2023	21	890	2,20,000
Total	**1013**	**30878.505**	

Analysis of Vigilance Department data (2006–2023) reveals the following:

- **Fluctuating Corruption Cases**: On average, 62 public servants were caught annually. The highest number (113) was recorded in 2016, while cases declined to 21 in 2023.
- **Increasing Financial Scale**: Bribe amounts increased significantly, with a record ₹61 lakh in 2022. The highest single bribe of ₹45 lakh was also reported in 2022.
- **Departmental Concentration**: Corruption was most prevalent in revenue, education, and health sectors, reflecting vulnerabilities in land registration, tax collection, and healthcare delivery.

- These figures indicate that the number of public servants involved in corruption is even larger than what is recorded in government documents.
- This fluctuation indicates inconsistent enforcement of anti-corruption measures.

Figure-1 Total Trapped Public Servants
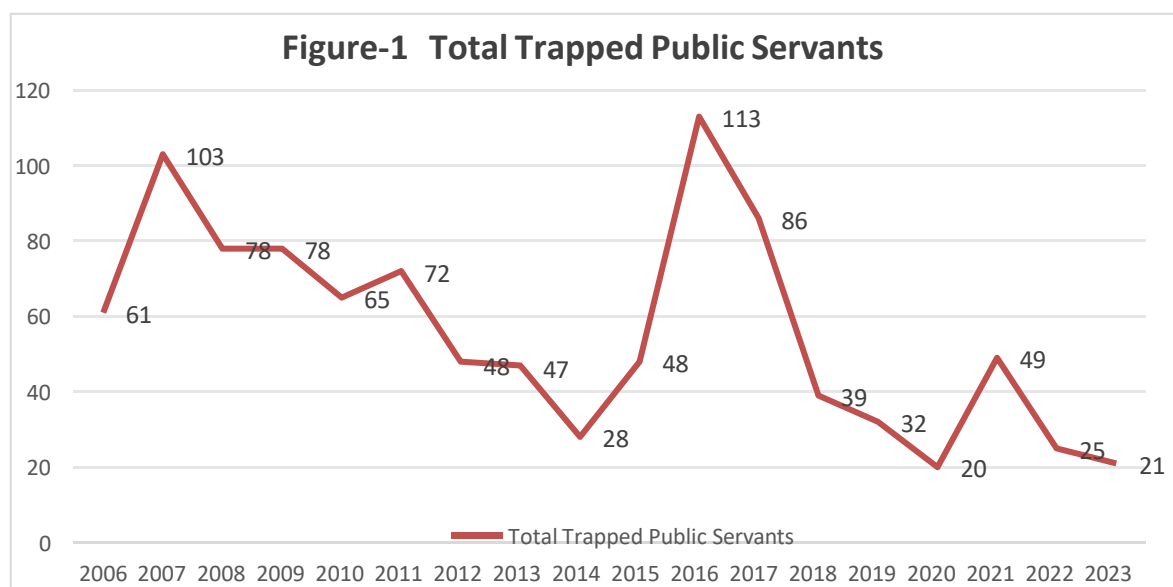
Ethical truancy

The study reveals a persistent and systemic prevalence of corruption in Bihar's public administration. Analysis of the reports of the Vigilance Department and Economic Offences Unit reveals that during the period 2006 to 2023, on an average 62 public servants were caught every year committing frauds, with significant financial implications. The increase in the total and highest bribe amounts, which reached ₹61 lakh and ₹45 lakh respectively, indicates that corruption is not limited to petty crimes but extends to high-value transactions. Corruption was most concentrated in the revenue, education and health departments. This reflects weaknesses in land registration, property disputes and tax collection processes, which undermine the delivery of essential public services.

2. factors contribute to the decline of ethical values in governance

Systemic Weaknesses

The systemic factors contributing to ethical absenteeism include:

- **Weak Monitoring Mechanisms**: Lack of effective oversight, especially at the frontline level, enables corrupt practices.
- **Cultural Normalization**: Social tolerance for bribery perpetuates corruption as a routine practice.Citizens often view bribery as a necessary means to deal with bureaucratic inefficiencies, creating a cycle where corruption becomes a routine aspect of public administration.

- **Inadequate Training**: Absence of ethics-focused training programs for public servants exacerbates the problem.
- **Accountability Gaps**: Senior officials often escape scrutiny due to political connections or procedural delays.
- **Inadequate accountability** - Senior administrators were also involved, reflecting gaps in hierarchical accountability. These oversight officials are often insulated from consequences due to political connections or procedural delays in investigations.

Socio-economic implications

The financial and social costs of ethical absence are severe -

- Economic losses – Corruption is wasting a huge amount of public money. The nearly ₹3 crore reported as bribes over 18 years represents resources that could have been allocated to infrastructure, education and healthcare.

- Erosion of public trust – Persistent corruption has eroded citizens' trust in public institutions, leading to frustration and disenchantment with civic processes and apathy towards governance. Transparency and accountability essential to democratic governance are also seriously affected.

- Social inequality – Corruption disproportionately affects the poor, vulnerable and marginalized populations, as only those who are able to pay bribes can access quality services. The poor, vulnerable and marginalized are further disadvantaged as they often do not have the financial means to pay bribes.

Implications for governance

Ethical absence has far-reaching consequences for governance -

- Policy failure – Corruption undermines the implementation of public policies and programs. Projects that benefit marginalized communities are often delayed, mismanaged, or ineffective due to embezzlement and bribery. • Administrative inefficiency - Inefficiency caused by corruption leads to longer processing times, higher transaction costs for citizens, and overall dissatisfaction with public services.

- Erosion of institutional integrity - The normalization of unethical practices undermines the credibility and legitimacy of governance institutions, making it difficult to implement reforms or rebuild trust.

Ethical challenges in Bihar's public administration

Several factors contribute to the erosion of ethical values among public servants in Bihar -

- Vigilance mechanisms in Bihar are often underfunded and understaffed, limiting their ability to detect and prevent corruption.

- Weak accountability systems allow corrupt officials to escape consequences, further reinforcing unethical behavior.

- High levels of poverty and unemployment create an environment where bribery and favoritism are seen as survival strategies rather than ethical violations.

- Public servants also face pressure to meet personal financial needs, making them vulnerable to unethical behavior.

- In many cases, corruption is normalized as a part of bureaucratic processes, where citizens themselves participate in bribery to expedite services.

- Normalization of unethical behavior creates a vicious cycle that reinforces corrupt behavior.

- Ethical training and values-based education are often absent in professional development programs for public servants in Bihar.

- Without a clear understanding of ethical frameworks, officials fail to recognize or prioritize their ethical obligations.

- They get the courage to take bribes and commit corruption from the fact that they will never be caught and even if they are caught, there will not be severe punishment.

3. Policy And Administrative Reforms

A comprehensive strategy targeting systemic, cultural, and individual factors is needed to address the ethical absence and restore ethical values in public administration. The following recommendations are designed to address the root causes of corruption, enhance institutional integrity, and promote a culture of accountability and transparency among public servants.

1. Strengthening oversight mechanisms

Strong oversight mechanisms are important to prevent unethical behaviour and detect corruption early.

- Empower vigilance departments - Allocate additional resources to vigilance units to enhance their capacity for monitoring, investigation and enforcement. Introduce advanced technologies such as data analytics and artificial intelligence to detect irregularities in financial transactions and administrative processes.

- Independent anti-corruption bodies - Establish or strengthen independent anti-corruption agencies with autonomy from political interference. These bodies should have the authority to investigate and prosecute high-ranking officials without external pressure.

- Periodic audits - Conduct regular audits of government departments to identify lapses and irregularities. The findings should be made public to ensure transparency and build public confidence.

2. Promote ethical education and training

Ethical behaviour can be inculcated through tailored education and regular training programmes for government employees.

- Mandatory ethics training - Include ethics and integrity courses in induction programmes for all government employees. Regular workshops should focus on real-life case studies, emphasising the consequences of ethical lapses.

- Ethics committees in departments - Establish departmental ethics committees to reinforce ethical standards, resolve complaints, and guide employees on ethical dilemmas.

- Values-based education - Partner with academic institutions to develop programs that emphasize values, civic responsibility, and public service ethics for aspiring public servants.

3. Simplify bureaucratic processes

Complex bureaucratic processes often create opportunities for bribery and unethical behavior. Streamlining these processes can significantly reduce corruption.

- Digital governance - Expand the use of digital platforms for service delivery such as online tax payments, property registration, and grievance redressal. Automation reduces human contact, thereby reducing opportunities for bribery.

- One-stop service centers - Establish centralized service centers where citizens can access multiple government services under one roof. This reduces procedural complexity and the need for intermediaries.

- Process transparency - Make public the detailed process flow, timelines and costs for availing services to empower citizens and prevent manipulation.

4. Empowering citizens

Citizens play a key role in holding public servants accountable. Empowering them to resist and report corruption is important.

- Public awareness campaigns - Launch statewide campaigns to educate citizens about their rights and ways to report corruption. Use social media, print media and grassroots outreach to ensure wide reach.

- Accessible grievance redressal mechanisms - Establish toll-free helplines, mobile applications and online portals where citizens can anonymously report corruption. Ensure prompt follow-up and action to build trust in the system.

- Whistleblower protections - Implement strong protections for whistleblowers, ensuring they do not face retaliation or harm for exposing corruption.

5. Enhancing accountability

Accountability systems should ensure that public servants are accountable for their actions and face consequences for unethical behavior.

- Performance-based evaluation – Link promotions, evaluations and incentives to ethical performance and integrity. Enforce penalties for unethical conduct such as dismissal or pay cuts to deter misconduct.

- Public disclosure requirements – Require public officials to regularly disclose their financial assets and liabilities to detect inconsistent wealth accumulation.

- Transparent recruitment processes – Ensure that the recruitment and appointment process for public servants is merit-based and free from favouritism or nepotism.

6. Improve institutional culture

Change in institutional culture is essential to maintain long-term ethical governance.

- Leadership commitment - Leaders in public administration should model ethical behavior, demonstrating integrity and accountability in their actions. Ethical leadership fosters a culture where employees feel encouraged to uphold ethical values.

- Recognition programs - Reward ethical behavior through formal recognition programs, such as awards for integrity or public service excellence. Highlighting positive examples can inspire others to do the same.

- Regular feedback loops - Create platforms for employees and citizens to provide feedback on government functioning, ensuring continuous improvement.

7. Enhance legal and policy framework

A strong legal and policy framework is essential to institutionalize ethical behavior and prevent corruption.

- Strengthen anti-corruption laws - Update laws to impose harsher penalties for corruption and streamline judicial processes for quick resolution of cases.

- Transparency in procurement - Implement transparent e-procurement systems for government contracts to reduce discretionary decision-making.

- Periodic policy review – Review and update policies periodically to address emerging corruption risks and incorporate best practices.

8. Monitoring and Evaluation

Continuous monitoring and evaluation are critical to assess the effectiveness of anti-corruption measures.

- Independent review – Appoint independent agencies to assess the impact of reforms and provide recommendations for improvement.

- Data-driven decision making – Use analytics to identify patterns in corruption cases and prioritise high-risk areas for intervention.

- Annual report – Publish annual reports detailing anti-corruption efforts, including achievements, challenges and future plans.

8. Conclusion

Ethical absenteeism in Bihar's public administration undermines governance, erodes public trust, and exacerbates inequality. While existing anti-corruption mechanisms have had limited success, systemic weaknesses such as inadequate oversight, cultural normalization, and lack of ethics training persist. Addressing these challenges requires a multi-faceted strategy encompassing institutional reforms, ethical education, citizen empowerment, and enhanced accountability mechanisms.

The findings of this study underscore the urgent need for a collective effort to restore integrity in public administration. By prioritizing transparency, accountability, and ethical governance, Bihar can set a precedent for addressing corruption and fostering equitable socio-economic development.

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