Integrity of Professionals Leading Public Institutions Is Crucial for Effective Democracy

By

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Debates on the undermining of public institutions have focused on undemocratic pressures from ‘external actors’ leading to weakened institutions. Rajesh Tandon in this blog asks the reverse question: why have professionals working and heading public institutions allowed such decline, ‘failing’ the institutions they have been appointed to serve and lead? As active citizens, we must demand their integrity to ensure effective democracy for all.

In recent years, the general debate about weakening of public institutions, and as a result India’s democracy, has often ‘accused’ the central government of systematically undermining the autonomy and effective functioning of a wide-range of public institutions in the country. These include institutions ranging from the Reserve Bank of India to universities, of course the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) and the ‘attack’ on freedom of expression.

The widespread undermining of institutions began to gain public visibility when two successive Governors of the Reserve Bank of India quit amidst stories of ‘undue interference’ from the offices of the Prime Minister and the Finance Minister. The saga of non-performing assets (NPAs) in Indian banking, especially public sector banks, continues to hold our attention, with hundreds of billions of dollars given out as ‘undeserving’ loans turning into bad debts. The Governing Boards of these banks, their ‘independent’ directors, and Chairmen-cum-managing directors failed to exercise oversight and due diligence. Many big time ‘wilful’ defaulters were allowed to leave the country ‘unnoticed’.

The persistent questioning of ‘favouritism’ shown to certain big business houses by industry regulators set up to act independently reveals another strand of decay. A recent, blatant example of this is the rapid rise of a new entrant through tweaking of rules to accord favour to this new entrant over long-established players in the mobile network sector.

Another set of public institutions which has been in the news are universities, national research funding councils and their regulators. Vice-chancellors of prestigious universities in the country have continued to overlook numerous grievances of their students and faculty on a wide variety of academic and infrastructural issues to the detriment of effective teaching-learning in these institutions. Yet they continue to remain in office. Several professional governing bodies like Medical Council of India (MCI) have been certifying grossly unsatisfactory institutions as medical colleges.

The continued storyline of ‘acts of omission and commission’ (a metaphor of colonial times) by chartered accountants has a long history; the PWC and Satyam story was a predecessor to the latest Deloitte & ILFS saga; a multi-billion dollar scandal of lost public money.
Less said the better about the CBI and other security, police and investigative agencies, which ‘lost’ their public credibility a long time ago,

There was a time when Indian media was seen as the ‘fourth’ pillar of democracy, independent and neutral. ‘Freedom of press’ today is a toothless phrase, with the bulk of print and electronic media behaving as mouthpieces of the national government. Whatever happened to autonomous, self-regulation mechanisms of newspapers and television?

In recent months, especially over this period of parliamentary elections, the Election Commission of India has come in for strong criticism for its ‘partisan’ actions favouring the ruling regime. Its credibility as an independent institution has taken a severe beating.

Lest I am accused of contempt and/or as anti-national, I leave it to readers to recall recent episodes concerning the Indian military and the Supreme Court of India!

Most commentators focus their criticisms on the ruling government, its party and its leadership for putting pressure on our public institutions to act in ways that are undemocratic, violate established norms and procedures, or are sometimes even downright illegal. Unfortunately, such pressures from ‘external actors’ in the functioning of independent institutions resulting in their decline is not unique to the current regime. They have existed in the past, and will continue in the future.

I am grappling with the reverse question: why have professionals heading such public institutions allowed such decline?

India is rightly proud of its vast and growing pool of professionals—teachers, professors, lawyers, jurists, doctors, engineers, architects, chartered accountants, software engineers, journalists, bankers, technologists, scientists. Our professionals have made global impacts, and are recruited internationally for their excellence.

Why then do such professionals ‘allow’ the decline of public institutions when they are appointed to act as leaders? Do Indian professionals in the contemporary context lack a strong and upright backbone? Has their professional education and training ignored questions of morality and ethics, or is professional integrity merely something to be read about in textbooks and case studies but not to be followed in everyday professional life?

A professional is a person of specialised expertise; this expertise is acquired through years of formal education and grooming by mentors. She/he often belongs to an association of fellow professionals; such professional associations are expected to have a code of conduct for their members;
standards of practice in each profession are clearly defined; and mechanisms for ‘debarring’ those violating such standards also exist. A professional takes a vow to uphold certain standards and follow the code of conduct becoming of that profession.

The rise of professions in modern society over the past 150 years or so has been triggered to provide specially trained people to ‘serve public interest’. This is precisely why professionals are appointed to provide leadership to public institutions.

Why then are such experienced professionals succumbing to external pressures? What keeps them from standing up to their professional codes of conduct? What stops them from resisting pressures to violate norms and procedures? What makes them ‘collude’ with the rich and the powerful?

Public institutions of modern democracy need to be governed and led in ways that command respect from all citizens. This respect is based primarily on the conduct of the leadership of such institutions. Highly trained professionals, who have already excelled in their professions (and also made enough money to have a pleasant retired life), are appointed to positions of governance and leadership of public institutions.

Why are these Indian professionals failing the public institutions they are leading, failing democracy – and failing each one of us? As active citizens, we must demand their integrity to ensure effective democracy for all.