



**Title, Author:** Ethical Dilemmas of a Civil Servant, Anil Swarup

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*"After a time, Civil Servants tend to become no longer servants and no longer civil" – Winston Churchill*

Anil Swarup, an upright and honest civil servant from the Indian Administrative Service, has, over a long career, earned a great reputation. Known for producing quick results, he was instrumental in getting things done through his unique way of approaching issues and at times bypassing the conventional way the bureaucracy operates in India. Since retirement in 2018, he has penned thoughts on this career in his second book *Ethical Dilemmas of a Civil Servant*.

The book is a light read where the author highlights real life situations he encountered spanning 38 years of his career from his early days as a Sub District Magistrate with the State Government of Uttar Pradesh up until his retirement as a Secretary with the Central Government. The book is divided into 88 chapters of not more than 2-3 pages, each highlighting a situation, the dilemma he faced and whether the decision he took was ethically right or wrong. The lucidly written chapters give changing flavours of the type of situations encountered by the civil servants from the initial stages in the field to the highest policy formulation levels.

In India, the bureaucracy is often reviled for being indifferent, procedure oriented, rules bound, self-seeking and corrupt. The book gives a first-hand view of the various interactions between the different players in the game – the bureaucrat, the politician, the media, the corporate and the common man. What adds spice to the book is that the author was from the state of Uttar Pradesh, which is not just among the most backward states of India, but also among the most corrupt. Hence once gets a very hands-on view of what plagues the system. The book can be split into two parts; the first deals with the author's experiences at the State Government and the latter at the Central Government, where the focus shifts to policy making.

An overarching theme across the book is the way bureaucrats were frequently transferred by ministers if they were not compliant – in many cases for no reason at all. The extremes were such that the author highlighted an instance when a minister, after a visit to a district, issued transfer orders of a number of officials simply because he wanted to show to the public that he was taking action. In another instance, when the author refused to suspend a senior officer at a minister's request, the author himself was transferred.

Swarup also highlights in detail his interactions with two Chief Ministers – one who genuinely wanted to bring about change and sought his opinion because he found the author spoke his mind and was not a 'yes' man. The other who was corrupt to the extreme. A specific instance was narrated when a young junior officer walked into the Chief Minister's room with a briefcase full of cash. Similar instances are highlighted even at the Central Government level, where the author had to bypass the system and use his network of connections to have a known corrupt minister removed.

A third aspect which was repeatedly highlighted through multiple stories was how the bureaucrats change their opinion based on what the minister wants to hear, even though they may have an opposite viewpoint.

In the latter part of the book, the author dwells at length into some of the challenges he faced while trying to resolve issues as a Secretary at the Ministry of Coal, subsequently Ministry of Education. In the latter he failed in his quest to bring about any meaningful change as he puts it: *"I was soon to discover that whereas in the coal sector, mining was underground and the mafia operated above it, in the minefield of school education it was the other way round. All the mafias existed underground, and they were all masked, masquerading as 'noble giants'".*

Throughout the narrative, while the author has been generous in appreciation and named bureaucrats who have been honest and upright, he has carefully chosen not to name those who succumbed to political pressure or were dishonest. What the book lacks though is that it touches upon the issues at a peripheral level, and hence lacks the intricate details one craves in many chapters.

Overall, the book is a great contribution to understanding and appreciating the multiple issues faced by our administrators. It leaves us better informed about the inner workings of India's government machinery, while underlying the fact that there are many upright bureaucrats out there doing what needs to be done in a not so conducive socio-political environment.

**Gaurav Narain**  
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