

1. The Difficulty of Being Honest

Context:

- “Honesty is the best policy” was a favourite topic of debates in school. It is another matter that both sides — for and against — ended up supporting the motion; the only point of difference being whether honesty was its own reward or it came with an avoidable cost.

What is Honesty?

- It is defined as **“a way of behaving that you think is best in a particular situation”, or as “prudent or expedient conduct or action”**. In either case, it is a well-considered approach, not merely the ingrained response of an individual based on inherent values.
- Is honesty to be understood as a pragmatic way of dealing with situations or is it simply an ethical response to any given situation influenced by an individual’s character? **When an individual is faced with a dilemma of making a choice, he either responds instinctively or makes a well-reasoned decision.**
- For instance, an auto driver finding a passenger’s purse in his vehicle, may decide to look for the passenger, deposit the purse in a police station, or report the matter to his owner. As long as he doesn’t keep the money with him, he may have acted honestly.

Honesty as a Policy Always comes with a Price:

- The path of honesty, like dharma, is straight yet seldom simple. It often turns out to be tortuous, consumes more energy.
- The honest, however, go on regardless, perhaps driven by an inner force that borders on recklessness. A society that creates hurdles which exhaust the honest or wound them paves the path for its own perdition.
- At the same time, should honesty be an obsession? Should it drive itself so hard that nothing survives save itself? No system can be productive if it is obsessed with defining the idea of honesty narrowly and subjecting everyone to a hidebound, arbitrary ideal.
- The honest, one could say, are those who are honest to their job and achieve the desired result by adopting honest means, being neither unduly swayed by the pressure to perform at all costs nor weighed down by passive principles that shackle performance.
- For example, **if a public servant decides to accommodate the genuine concerns of an individual without compromising public interest**, it cannot be termed a dishonest act.

Interventions to resolve such individual difficulties cannot be treated as favours to individuals.

- The Prevention of Corruption Act is meant to be a deterrent against exercising judgement with malafide intent; Civil servants have to solve problems without being shackled by the fear that their discretion in resolving a difficulty could be regarded as acts of undue benevolence.
- There is a price for honesty as for everything else in life. Being prepared to pay that price, directly or by way of collateral damage, is part of the honest act. The sermon is that honesty is its own reward and it is recognised in the long run. In the real world, “the long run” could be unpredictably long.
- That those opposed by the honest strike back and the price for the honest could be in the form of lonely suffering, even noticeable isolation.

Conclusion:

- Honest may not be physically strong or powerful; they have courage and that courage is their strength. Those that do not stand by them in that hour of grief need or isolation might not be courageous.
- The essential characteristic of an honest person is that he or she is truthful. His action is based on an inner voice that guides him to make a distinction between what is right and what is wrong, generally influenced by the prevailing law, his moorings and morality.