



Mains Practice Question

Q. What is empathy? Is it an important trait for the present-day civil servants? Explain with examples.

05 Sep, 2019 GS Paper 4 Theoretical Questions

Introduction

Ethics revolves around human virtues and vices. Virtue is the excellence of character and can be defined as acquired power or capacity for moral actions. Virtues like honesty, integrity, forgiveness, empathy etc are desired and admired by all and especially by civil servants as they need them the most in order to manage their personal and professional lives.

Empathy

“Yet, taught by time, my heart has learned to glow at other’s good, and melt at another’s woe”. -Homer

- Empathy is the **capacity to understand and share another’s state of mind and emotions** and often characterised as the ability to **“put oneself into another’s shoes”**.
- It is both a **cognitive** and an **emotional** skill.
- The term empathy can be used in **two** ways-
 - Firstly, it can mean a **“thinking”** response, or the ability to think about and describe how another being feels.
 - Secondly, it can also refer to the ability to **“feel”** and to experience another person’s or animal’s feelings and circumstances.

Importance for Civil Servants

- Empathy is related to a **sense of kinship and concern** for others that is why it allows civil servants to feel **connected and relatable** to their problems.
- It is because of empathy and concern that civil servants **exhibit their character** as it is all about **evincing interest in the welfare** of human beings.
- Civil servants without empathy, may not survive for long because empathetic character **induces some sort of belongingness** in the citizens.
- Empathetic behaviour and belongingness naturally leads to **personal affection** which in turn **solidifies the bond** between the administrator and the administered.
- People, rich in empathy and emotionally intelligent behaviour are **socially effective** and have better **interpersonal relationships**, creating an **empathetic and supportive social structure** around them.

Examples

- **Mahatma Gandhi** lived a simple life because he was **empathetic and sensitive**. He renounced a luxurious life because he could empathise with Indian masses suffering under the exploitative British rule. On empathy, his advice to anyone who was in doubt if an action was good or not, was to put oneself in the situation of the **poorest of the poor** in the country and see how a **particular policy and programme will impact** him or her.

- **IPS officer Atul V Kulkarni** and his team started conducting **grievance redressal meetings for distressed citizens** especially for **women** under the initiative of **Bharosa Cells** and **“Nirbhaya Pathak”** control vans for patrolling streets and housing societies. His idea behind these initiatives was to overcome the fear people have while going to police stations and most importantly his empathetic behaviour towards the vulnerable sections of society, particularly women which he had seen during his college life.

Conclusion

- The matter of empathy becomes important in developing countries like India where civil servants are particularly **not that empathetic** towards the common people and have the **sense of superiority** which **alienates** them and severely destroys the bond of belongingness.
- Empathy, a term often used for a kind of **concern for others** is one of the most important virtues and must be developed in all of us. It has greater implications because when empathetic people see someone in pain, they feel it with them instead of feeling it for them.

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