

Ethics in Public Life and Pathways to Corruption-Free Governance Insights from the Bhartiya Wisdom

Presented By

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Abstract

Despite the presence of comprehensive laws, institutional frameworks, and technological interventions, corruption continues to persist in public governance, indicating that the challenge lies not merely in defective systems but in a deeper erosion of ethical values. Contemporary governance models largely emphasize external mechanisms such as regulations, surveillance, and punitive measures, while comparatively neglecting the role of inner moral discipline and character formation of public officials. Sustainable and corruption-free governance can be achieved only when ethical conduct is driven by personal integrity rather than fear of punishment. Bhartiya wisdom, particularly as reflected in the Ramayana, presents Lord Rama as an ideal model of ethical leadership whose governance was rooted in dharma, transparency, accountability, equality, and unwavering commitment to public welfare. This study argues that corruption is fundamentally a crisis of character and moral consciousness. Therefore, the integration of ancient ethical principles with modern administrative practices is essential for fostering ethical public life and achieving enduring, corruption-free governance. The study adopts a qualitative methodology using primary data from 60 college students and secondary analysis of classical Indian texts.

Key Words: Ethics in Public Life, Corruption-Free Governance, Indian Wisdom, Ramayana, Moral Character, Ethical Leadership, Dharma, Transparency, Personal Integrity, Value-Based Education, Spiritual Ethics, Character Building.

Introduction

Ethics in public life is central to the credibility, effectiveness, and sustainability of democratic governance. Public institutions function successfully only when those entrusted with authority act with integrity, transparency, accountability, and a sense of moral responsibility. However, persistent problems such as corruption, abuse of power, favoritism, and decline in public trust indicate that legal regulations and institutional controls alone are insufficient to ensure ethical governance. These challenges highlight the need for ethical leadership and value-based governance frameworks that go beyond formal laws.

“Corruption in public life is not merely a legal violation

But, a deeper ethical failure.”

This perspective shifts the discourse from rule-based governance to value-based leadership, which forms the core argument of this study.

While modern governance systems emphasize surveillance, punishment, and compliance mechanisms, these external controls often fail when internal moral restraint is absent. Therefore, pathways to corruption-free governance must include the cultivation of ethical consciousness, self-discipline, and moral accountability among public officials.

“प्रजा सुखे सुखं राज्ञः, प्रजानां च हिते हितम्।
नात्मप्रियं हितं राज्ञः, प्रजानां तु प्रियं हितम्॥”

(वाल्मीकि रामायण, अयोध्याकाण्ड)

This verse explains a foundational principle of ethical governance in Indian thought, asserting that the happiness and welfare of the ruler are inseparable from the well-being of the people. It rejects self-interest as a legitimate basis of authority and establishes public welfare as the true measure of political legitimacy. By focusing on this idea, the Ramayana offers a normative framework for governance grounded in service, accountability, and moral responsibility principles that remain critically relevant to contemporary democratic administration.

Unlike modern governance approaches that primarily depend on external enforcement, Rama’s ethical framework emphasizes internal moral discipline. Ethical conduct arises from personal character, self-restraint, and commitment to Dharma. In this sense, corruption is understood not only as misuse of public resources but as deviation from ethical consciousness and public duty. Such a value-based governance model offers an alternative pathway toward corruption-free public life by focusing on moral leadership rather than coercive control.

यद्यदाचरति श्रेष्ठस्तत्तदेवेतरो जनः।

स यत्प्रमाणं कुरुते लोकस्तदनुवर्तते॥

(Source: Bhagavad Gita, 3.21)

This shloka highlights the ethical responsibility of leaders in public life. It states that the conduct of those in positions of authority becomes a standard for society. When leaders act ethically, society follows ethical paths; when they act corruptly, corruption spreads. In the context of public governance, this verse

emphasizes that corruption-free administration depends largely on the moral character and ethical behavior of public officials.

LITERATURE REVIEW

- **Soumyajit Pali (2025)** highlights how Ramayan exemplifies ethical leadership and moral principles applicable to organizational and governance contexts. Even this review elaborate the parallels between ancient management principles from the Ramayan and modern management theories, such as scientific management and stakeholder ethics.
- **Sanjeeb Kakoty** emphasizes that probity in public life involves more than avoiding corruption, it requires promoting core values like accountability, transparency, impartiality, and the rule of law. The paper underscores the significance of effective laws with fair enforcement, and a culture of discipline to ensure integrity.
- **Shah & Shah (2021)** studies interpret the Ramayan as a rich source of ethical leadership and governance principles rooted in dharma, justice, and social responsibility.
- **Mr. M. Sohail Mr. S. Cavill (2007)** concludes that improving accountability and ethical practices leads to more sustainable, quality infrastructure projects, reducing corruption and promoting better construction practices globally.
- **Mark Philip** argues that controlling corruption requires balancing institutional mechanisms with fostering a professional, integrity-based political culture. Ultimately, democracies should rely on specialized institutions for accountability rather than widespread participation, which can threaten political coordination and legitimacy.

Objectives

- ✓ To reframe corruption as a crisis of moral character
- ✓ To bridge ancient Bhartiya ethical wisdom with modern public governance
- ✓ To examine the role of ethical education in character building and responsible citizenship

Research Methodology

The study follows a qualitative research approach to examine ethics in public life and corruption-free governance. A qualitative approach was adopted to capture ethical perceptions and moral reasoning, which cannot be adequately measured through quantitative tools alone.

Primary data was collected through personal interviews of 60 college students, selected using purposive sampling, to understand youth perceptions on ethics, leadership, and corruption.

Secondary data was drawn from classical texts such as the Ramayana and the Bhagavad Gita, analyzed as sources of ethical governance values, along with relevant books and research articles.

Research Gap

Existing research focuses mainly on institutional, legal reforms, and law enforcement while it is neglecting character-based and spiritually grounded ethics in governance.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

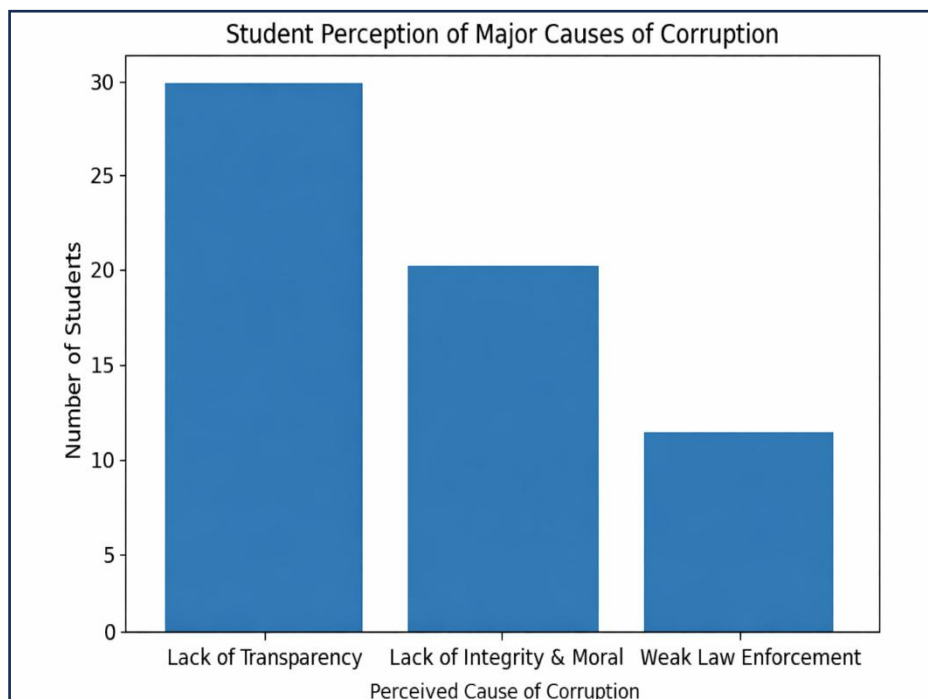
Primary Data Interpretation

Primary data were collected from 60 college students to examine their perceptions of ethical dilemmas in public life. The study explored multiple dimensions of ethics, leadership, and corruption; however, the analysis mainly highlights the most significant responses relevant to the objectives of the research.

Question 1: Causes of Corruption

Table 1

Cause	No. of Students
Lack of Transparency	30
Lack of Integrity	20
Weak Law Enforcement	10

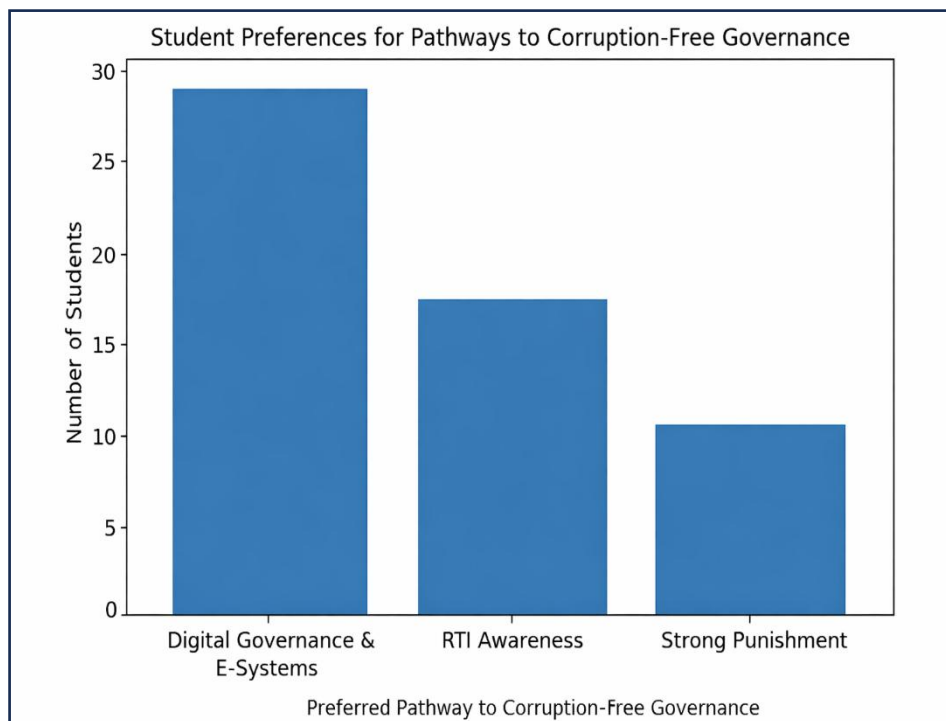


As per analysis of above chart majority of respondents (50%) identified lack of transparency as the primary cause of corruption, followed by lack of integrity and moral character among public officials (33.3%). Only 16.7% considered weak law enforcement as the main cause. These findings suggest that corruption is viewed more as a moral and character-based failure than merely an institutional or legal deficiency.

Question 2: Pathways to Corruption-Free Governance

Table 2

Pathway	No. of Students
Digital Governance & E-Systems	30
RTI Awareness	20
Strong Punishment	10

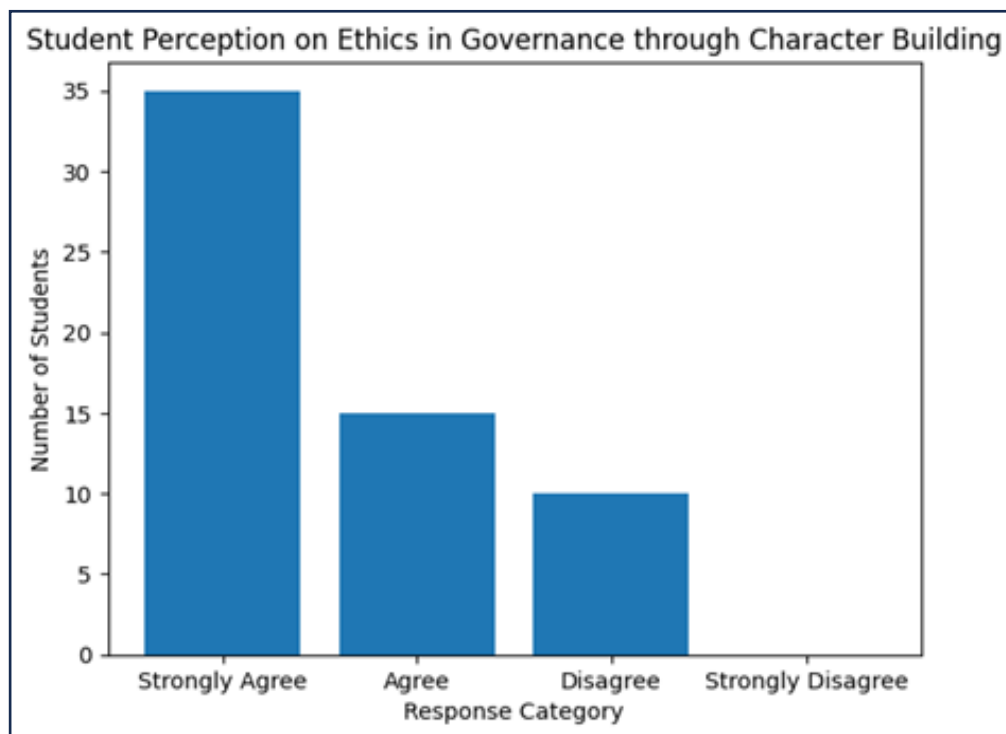


In this matter of pathways toward corruption-free governance, students strongly emphasized digital governance and e-based systems as the most effective solution. Technology-driven processes and cashless transactions were perceived as tools that minimize human discretion and enhance transparency. RTI awareness and citizen participation were also considered important, whereas strict punitive measures received limited support. This reflects a preference for preventive and transparency-oriented governance over punishment-centric approaches.

Question 3: Ethics, Character Building, and Governance

Table 3

Response	No. of Students
Strongly Agree	35
Agree	15
Disagree	10
Strongly Disagree	0



This finding reinforces the paper’s central argument that corruption is perceived more as a moral deficiency than a legal failure. A clear majority of respondents supported the view that ethical governance can be achieved through character building and spiritual transformation. Out of 60 students, 35 strongly agreed and 15 agreed with this statement, while only 10 disagreed and none strongly disagreed. This strong consensus highlights that ethical governance must be rooted in moral education, value inculcation, and inner transformation rather than external enforcement alone.

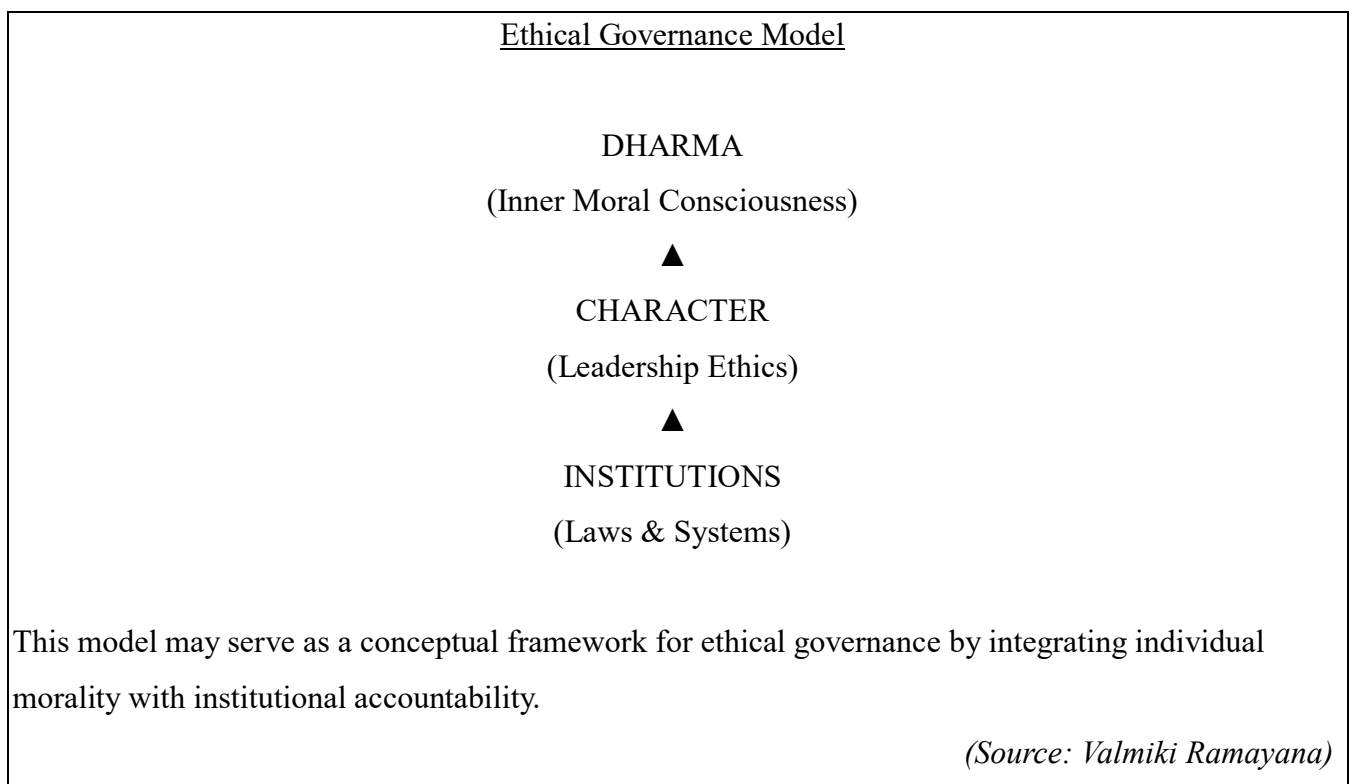
Secondary Data Interpretation

Secondary data were collected from authoritative classical texts such as the *Ramayana*, the Bhagavad Gita, and other sources of Bhartiya wisdom, which were analyzed for their ethical and governance-related principles.

Ethical Dimensions of Lord Shri Ram as a Model of Ethical Governance

The character of Lord Shri Ram in the Ramayan represents an integrated ethical framework where personal virtue forms the foundation of public authority. His leadership reflects not mythological idealism but practical governance ethics relevant to contemporary public life.

- Dharma as Supreme Duty
- Integrity and Truthfulness
- Equality and Justice
- Service-Oriented Leadership
- Accountability and Moral Responsibility
- Compassion and Empathy
- Self-Regulation and Discipline
- Respect for Institutions and Social Order



This model explains that good and honest governance does not start with laws, but from within a person. Dharma means the inner voice that tells us what is right and what is wrong. When a leader follows this inner moral sense, they choose the right path even when no one is watching. In the Ramayan, Lord Shri Ram accepted exile not because of a law, but because his conscience and sense of duty guided him.

When a person has strong dharma, it shapes their character. A leader with good character does not misuse power and always thinks about the welfare of people. Lord Shri Ram, even as a king, placed the happiness and trust of his people above his own comfort. This shows that ethical leadership naturally comes from strong character.

The last part is institutions laws, rules, and systems. These work properly only when the people running them are ethical. In Ram Rajya, there were fewer rules, yet justice prevailed because leaders were morally strong. This model teaches us that to reduce corruption, we must build ethical values and character along with creating strong laws.

❖ Case Study:1 Gurukul Education of Bhagwan Shri Ram and Its Role in Ethical Governance

In Bhartiya tradition, education was never limited to intellectual learning alone; it was a holistic process aimed at shaping character, discipline, and a sense of responsibility toward society. The Gurukul system played a central role in this approach. Bhagwan Shri Ram, regarded as Maryada Purushottam, received his early education in the Gurukul of Maharshi Vashishth and later under Maharshi Vishwamitra. His Gurukul training became the foundation of his ethical leadership and ideal governance as the King of Ayodhya.

During his Gurukul life, Shri Ram was trained in Vidya (knowledge), Vinaya (humility), Dharma (righteous conduct), and Seva (service). Living a simple life alongside other students, he learned equality, self-discipline, obedience, and respect for elders and teachers. The Gurukul emphasized control over desires, emotional balance, truthfulness, and accountability qualities essential for public leadership. Through daily routines, self-study, physical discipline, and moral instruction, Shri Ram internalized ethical values rather than merely memorizing rules.

A significant aspect of Shri Ram's education was experiential learning. Under the guidance of Maharshi Vishwamitra, he protected yajnas from disruptive forces, demonstrating early exposure to responsibility, duty, and public service. This practical engagement helped him understand that leadership is not about authority but about protecting social order. His willingness to accept difficult duties without ego or resistance reflects the success of Gurukul-based moral education.

Relevance to Modern Education and Governance

This case study highlights that ethical governance is a natural outcome of value-based education. The Gurukul system's focus on character building, responsibility, and moral consciousness prepared Shri Ram not only to rule but to rule ethically. Modern education systems can draw inspiration from this model by integrating ethics, experiential learning, and social responsibility as foundational elements, thereby nurturing future leaders capable of corruption-free and people-centric governance.

(Source: Valmiki Ramayan)

❖ Case Study: 2 Ravana – Knowledge Without Character

Ravana, the king of Lanka, was among the most accomplished figures in the Ramayana. He was a Vedic scholar, a master of the four Vedas and six Shastras, a powerful administrator, and an intense devotee of Lord Shiva. His intellectual and spiritual credentials were unquestionable. Lanka itself was a prosperous, technologically advanced, and well-governed kingdom.

Still Ravana remained bonded by kam (desire), ahankar (ego), and moh (delusion). His abduction of Sita was not driven by ignorance but by a conscious moral transgression, repeatedly warned against by his own ministers Vibhishana, Maricha, Kumbhakarna, and even Mandodari.

Ravana's downfall resulted not from lack of knowledge but from failure of self-control and moral restraint. Ravana's learning became an instrument of self-justification. This imbalance ultimately destroyed not only Ravana but also his kingdom and lineage.

(Source: Valmiki Ramayan)

❖ Case Study: 3 Chanakya's Character and Ethics in Governance

Chanakya, the author of the Arthashastra, laid the foundation of ethical governance by emphasizing character and moral discipline as the roots of effective administration. He believed that the quality of governance depends on the ethical conduct of rulers and officials rather than on laws alone. According to Chanakya, self-control, integrity, wisdom, and a strong sense of duty are essential virtues for those in power.

Chanakya viewed corruption as a result of moral decline and unchecked greed, which cannot be eliminated only through punishment. Therefore, he advocated transparency, accountability, and constant vigilance in administration, along with ethical training of public officials. His approach combined practical governance with moral responsibility, ensuring that power is exercised in the interest of public welfare.

In essence, Chanakya's philosophy highlights that sustainable and corruption-free governance begins from within the individual. His ideas remain relevant in modern governance, reinforcing the importance of character building, ethical leadership, and value-based administration as the true foundation of good governance.

(Source: Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) literature on ethics)

Case Study: 4 Plato on Character and Ethical Governance

Plato, in his work *The Republic*, emphasized that good governance is rooted in the moral and intellectual character of rulers. He argued that justice in the state is possible only when those who govern possess wisdom, self-control, and a deep commitment to truth. Plato strongly believed that power without virtue leads to corruption and injustice.

According to Plato, the ideal ruler is the King, whose personal character is shaped by ethical education and rational thinking. Such rulers govern not for personal gain but for the collective good of society. Plato viewed moral education and character formation as essential foundations of a just and stable political system.

Thus, Plato's philosophy highlights that ethical governance begins with inner virtue and moral discipline. His ideas remain relevant in modern governance, reinforcing the view that character building and ethical leadership are essential to prevent corruption and ensure justice.

(Source: Plato, The Republic)

Conclusion:

The findings of this research clearly indicate that ethical governance begins with character formation rather than institutional control alone. Both primary and secondary data affirm that corruption is widely perceived as a moral failure rather than merely a legal or procedural defect. Bhartiya wisdom, through examples such as Lord Rama, Chanakya, and the Gurukul system, highlights the transformative power of value-based education in shaping ethical leaders. Modern governance can greatly benefit by incorporating moral education, experiential learning, and spiritual ethics into public administration and educational frameworks. Such an approach can cultivate responsible citizens and leaders capable of ensuring corruption-free and people-centric governance.

Suggestions

- Ethical leadership training should be mandatory for public officials.
- Digital governance should be combined with ethical accountability.
- Transparency should be promoted to reduce corruption.
- Value-based education should be introduced at the school level.
- Continuous evaluation of ethical standards in governance is required.

Limitations of the Study

- The study is based on primary data collected from only 60 college students, which may not represent the views of the entire population.
- The study does not include views of government officials or administrators directly involved in public governance.

Future Scope of the Study

- Future studies can include a larger and more diverse sample, such as civil servants, policymakers, and citizens from different regions.
- Comparative studies can be undertaken between Bhartiya ethical values and Western governance models.

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