

Second Peace Lecture on Ethical Leadership in Public Governance

By Prof. Suman Chakraborty

Respected Vice-Chancellor, distinguished faculty, proud parents, dear students, and the future custodians of our society.

It is both an honour and a deeply reflective moment for me to stand before you today that celebrates not just achievement, but the shaping of character, conscience, and citizenship. A prize distribution ceremony is often seen as a recognition of excellence, but I would submit that it is also a quiet moment of transition - from being evaluated to becoming evaluators of the world around you.

Let me begin with a question that may appear simple, but it is in fact profoundly unsettling: What is the true test of leadership? Is it power? Is it popularity? Is it performance? Or is it something far more demanding - the ability to do the right thing when it is invisible, inconvenient, and often unrewarded? Because if we strip leadership of its symbolism and spectacle, what remains is a moral choice, repeated over time, under pressure.

We are living in an age of extraordinary advancement. Artificial Intelligence can predict disease before symptoms appear, algorithms can govern financial markets, and data flows faster than human cognition. Yet, paradoxically, we also inhabit a world where trust in institutions is fragile, where information is abundant, but truth is contested, and where efficiency is often celebrated more than integrity. This is not a technological crisis; it is a moral asymmetry. We have outpaced our ethics faster than we have scaled our intelligence.

In this context, ethical leadership in public governance cannot be reduced to compliance or the mere absence of wrongdoing. It is the courage to align power with purpose, authority with accountability, and decision-making with dignity. Public governance magnifies this responsibility because decisions affect millions who may never have a voice, policies shape futures that leaders may never live to see, and power operates at a scale where even small ethical lapses can produce large societal consequences.

Allow me to share a reflection from recent history. During the Ebola crisis in West Africa, healthcare systems were under immense strain. Some responses focused primarily on containment statistics, numbers, graphs, and projections. Others chose a more difficult path: engaging communities with transparency, building trust, and respecting local sensitivities. It was the latter that proved effective. People did not respond to authority alone; they responded to leadership they could trust. In that moment, ethics was not an abstract philosophy-it was the difference between containment and catastrophe.

Today's leaders, especially in public governance, must navigate three profound paradoxes. The first is the paradox of speed versus wisdom. Artificial intelligence enables us to take decisions almost instantaneously, but ethical judgment requires deliberation. Just because we can decide fast does not mean we should decide quickly. The second is the paradox of data versus judgment. We have more data than ever before, but data does not carry values. An algorithm can optimize efficiency, but only a human can interpret fairness. The third is the paradox of

power versus responsibility. Technology is concentrating power in unprecedented ways—governments can monitor, predict, and intervene at scale. But who monitors the monitors? Ethical leadership begins precisely where unchecked power ends.

Let us be clear about one defining reality of your generation: the future of governance will not be written in policy documents alone; it will be co-authored in code. Artificial intelligence systems are already influencing elections, shaping access to welfare, and determining patterns of policing. If governance becomes algorithmic, then ethics must become intrinsic to the design of those systems. Otherwise, we risk automating injustice at a scale never seen before.

There have already been sobering examples. In several countries, automated systems designed to detect welfare fraud ended up falsely accusing thousands of innocent citizens. The systems were efficient, mathematically robust, and operationally scalable—but they were ethically flawed. Lives were disrupted, trust eroded, and governance itself was questioned. This reminds us of a fundamental truth: an efficient injustice is still injustice.

Leadership, therefore, is undergoing a quiet but profound transformation. In the twentieth century, leadership was often about control. In the twenty-first century, it evolved into collaboration. In the century you are about to shape, leadership will be about stewardship - stewardship of intelligence, both human and artificial; stewardship of systems that are too complex for any one individual to fully comprehend; and stewardship of ethical boundaries that will define the legitimacy of power itself.

What, then, are the principles that must guide ethical leadership in this emerging world? Radical accountability, humane intelligence, transparency by design, inclusion as a default, and the courage to dissent - these are not optional virtues anymore; they are structural necessities.

And at this defining moment, allow me to place before you what I would call a **new mandate for the next century-Ten Commandments of Ethical Leadership in Public Governance**. Not as lofty ideals, but as actionable commitments you can carry into your lives from today.

First, **never outsource your conscience to a system** - however intelligent it may be. Algorithms can assist decisions; they cannot replace moral responsibility.

Second, **make every decision auditable—not just technically, but ethically** - If you cannot explain a decision in human terms, you should not take it.

Third, **design for the last person in the queue** - True governance is not measured by how the privileged benefit, but by how the most vulnerable are protected.

Fourth, **choose transparency even when opacity is convenient** - Trust, once broken, is almost impossible to rebuild.

Fifth, **treat power as a temporary trust, not a permanent entitlement** - Authority is not ownership; it is stewardship.

Sixth, **interrogate data, do not worship it** - Behind every dataset lies a bias, a blind spot, or a boundary you must understand.

Seventh, **institutionalize dissent** - Build systems where questioning is not punished but encouraged because silence is often the first symptom of ethical failure.

Eighth, **act early when something feels wrong** - Most governance failures are not sudden they are the result of small ethical compromises accumulating over time.

Ninth, **align innovation with inclusion** - If your technology excludes, discriminates, or marginalizes, it is not progress - it is regression in disguise.

And tenth, **leave every system more just than you found it** - That is the ultimate test of leadership—not what you inherit, but what you transform.

Dear students, you are stepping into history at a defining moment. You will inhabit a world where decisions are hybrid - part human, part machine; where truth will often be contested; and where ethical clarity will be more valuable than technical brilliance. You will face moments where the right decision will cost you, where the easy decision will tempt you, and where the popular decision will reward you. And in those moments, remember this: character is what you choose when no one can audit you.

Let me leave you with a philosophical reflection. The purpose of power is not to exercise control; it is to enable trust. And trust cannot be legislated, mandated, or enforced. It can only be earned - through ethical consistency, over time, under pressure.

If you remember nothing else from today, remember this: the next century will not be defined by how intelligent our machines become; it will be defined by how ethical our leaders remain. And perhaps, when history looks back at your generation, it will not say that you built powerful systems. It will say that you built a just society in an age where injustice could have been automated.

So go forth-not just as achievers, but as custodians of conscience. When you lead, lead with integrity. When you decide, decide with empathy. When you rise, rise with responsibility. And above all, never forget that the highest form of leadership is not authority over others, but accountability to humanity.

Congratulations to all the awardees. My very best wishes to each one of you.

Thank you.

Namaskar.