Ethics & Morality · GS - IV

Vikas is a government officer with over a decade of service in public administration. He has recently moved as the District Collector (DC) of Nainipura, a remote hilly district bordering a forest. Due to Nainipura's low levels of economic development, one of his major duties is to ensure proper functioning of the public distribution system (PDS) amongst the economically weaker sections (EWS).

During his on-site visits, Vikas was apprised of a typical administrative challenge in operating the PDS. To prevent leakages, all distributors were required to carry out real-time biometric identification of the beneficiaries, whose fingerprints were tallied with identity card records. This was creating problems as the operating system sometimes rejected fingerprint matching in the cases of growing children, manual labourers and senior citizens. The problem was further compounded in periods of low WiFi connectivity. The distributors, in such cases, resorted to personal discretion when they could identify the recipient.

Vikas had to address this problem on priority. Strictly adhering to government regulations would ensure fiscal probity but would greatly trouble the proposed beneficiary, i.e., EWS. It may even impinge on their fundamental right to life as per Article 21 of the Constitution. Conversely, leaving the resolution solely to the discretion of the distributors could lead to misuse and leakages.

(a) What are the options open to Vikas? How should he balance fiscal probity with empathy towards the designated beneficiaries?

(b) Discuss the ethics of using technology as a gatekeeper for welfare schemes.

EXAM YEAR	PAPER	SUBJECT
2026	GS - IV	Ethics & Morality

MARKS	WORD LIMIT
20	~250 words

Answer Hint

Fiscal probity, empathy, welfare delivery, digital exclusion, authentication failure, Article 21, discretion, accountability, inclusion, technology ethics

Model Answer

1. Options

Vikas can insist on biometric authentication in every case, allow unrestricted distributor discretion, or establish a regulated alternative authentication mechanism. The first risks exclusion, while the second creates opportunities for leakage and arbitrariness.

2. Ethical Balance

Vikas should retain biometric authentication as the primary mechanism but provide authorised alternatives for genuine authentication failures. Offline authentication, OTP or other approved identification mechanisms, exception registers and subsequent verification can protect both beneficiaries and public resources.

A grievance mechanism and periodic social audits should identify repeated failures. Distributors should be trained and monitored so that empathy does not become arbitrary discretion.

3. Technology as Gatekeeper

Technology can improve transparency, reduce duplication and strengthen fiscal accountability. However, it can also create exclusion through technological failure, poor connectivity, inaccurate databases and lack of digital literacy.

A welfare system must therefore follow the principle that technology should facilitate access rather than become an absolute barrier to entitlement.

4. Ethical Principle

Human dignity, inclusion, proportionality and accountability should guide digital governance. No genuine beneficiary should lose essential welfare merely because a technological authentication mechanism fails.

Conclusion

The ethical solution is not technology versus human discretion, but technology with accountable human safeguards, ensuring both fiscal probity and substantive access to welfare.

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