

“Governance Is a Moral Contract”: Shashi Tharoor Calls for Humane, Tech-Smart Reform at EPFO’s RGDE Anniversary Session

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In a thought-provoking keynote at the 24th edition of Reimagining Governance: Discourse for Excellence (RGDE), Dr Shashi Tharoor urged public institutions to rethink governance as a moral responsibility anchored in dignity, trust and courage.

The session marked the second anniversary and conclusion of Season One of RGDE, an institutional dialogue platform of the Employees’ Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO), hosted under the aegis of the Pandit Deendayal Upadhyaya National Academy of Social Security (PDUNASS). Central Board of Trustees members, officers from EPFO’s field and zonal offices across India, and officials from the Ministry of Labour and Employment joined the commemorative session.



Governance Beyond Compliance

Dr Tharoor described governance as “a moral contract between the State and its people,” stressing that transparency, accountability, participation and rule of law must operate alongside efficiency and empathy.

He cautioned against confusing digitisation with reform. “We must not merely digitise inefficiency; we must redesign it,” he said, advocating sustained Government Process Re-engineering and simplification of procedures.

Highlighting a paradox of modern administration, he observed that even in an age of vast digital capability, citizens are often repeatedly asked to prove identity and eligibility. Governance, he suggested, must move toward integration and seamless service delivery that spares citizens avoidable procedural

hardship.

Grievance redressal systems, he said, are not favour-granting platforms but instruments of democratic respect. Public service delivery must be rooted in dignity, empathy and institutional trust.

He also emphasised the need for scientific temperament in governance, evidence-based policy, data-driven review and reasoned judgment while cautioning that knowledge without ethics risks distancing institutions from the people they serve.

His concluding line resonated strongly: “When governance becomes truly just, citizens cease to feel governed; they begin to feel cared for.”

Ideas to Action

Launched on Good Governance Day in December 2024, RGDE was conceived as a reflective forum to examine governance beyond routine compliance. Over two years, its conversations have translated into institutional outcomes within EPFO, including the “Compassion in Governance” module inspired by Nobel Laureate Kailash Satyarthi, process simplification exercises drawing from public policy discussions, strengthened ethics training, and a forthcoming joint diploma programme in Labour Law and Social Security in collaboration with Gujarat National Law University.

Central Provident Fund Commissioner Ramesh Krishnamurthy reaffirmed EPFO’s commitment to citizen-centric and technology-enabled service delivery. Kumar Rohit, Director PDUNASS, highlighted how RGDE has strengthened ethical capacity and reflective leadership within the organisation.

The session concluded with an interactive exchange moderated by Uttam Prakash, Regional PF Commissioner and curator of RGDE. In a lighter moment, when asked whether Artificial Intelligence might one day replace politicians, Dr Tharoor quipped that while AI can process data and analyse trends, it cannot replicate human judgment, moral choice or democratic accountability.



With this anniversary session, RGDE formally concludes Season One. Season Two is expected to return with renewed design and deeper engagement, continuing the effort to strengthen governance that is accountable, technologically capable and fundamentally humane.

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