

Corruption in Public Life

by

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One of the most discussed topics of private conversation and one of the most accepted norms of life in India is the corruption in public services. Paradoxically, this does not find much mention in public speeches and writings, at least not to the extent that this malady is plaguing the Indian life. There may be several reasons for this paradox. Many perhaps think it is too obvious and common place to be mentioned in public utterances. Some people don't see any use in talking about a problem whose existence is indisputable and solution incomprehensible. Some others who view corruption as just like one of the many problems confronting India find other problems more pressing and more important at the moment to talk or write about. They seem to think that only when these pressing problems are solved can we afford to turn our attention to the traditional problem. Apparently, they don't see any interrelation between this long existing, deep rooted problem and other pressing problems of the moment. There may perhaps be some public figures or officials who do not find themselves morally competent to talk or write about a problem of this nature. Intellectuals would rather not talk about it as they don't consider the topic to be fit enough for serious intellectual discussion. Whatever the reason, this paradox is as surely there as the problem. This is a very unfortunate, disheartening and damaging situation. While this worm is eating into the vitals of the nation, there is not so much as the public realization of its existence, let alone any concerted and sincere efforts to eradicate it. All too often, the national

endeavors to tackle other critical problems, for which there is no dearth in India, are frustrated to a very great extent by this all pervading but least realized problem.

This conspiracy of public silence has eluded the foreign writers who deal with the problems of modern India. These writers who are understandably not expected to go deep into the stream of Indian life base most of their observations on official documents, public speeches and writings. Consequently, their books which are so eloquent on other matters of Indian life remain conspicuously reserved on this aspect. Some don't recognize the problem at all, others are satisfied with making a passing reference.

How prevalent is corruption in India? This is a question about which there may be some qualitative difference of opinions among various persons. People belonging to different situations of life may experience the sting of corruption in varying amounts. Then there are people who react to a particular corrupt situation in different ways. I have heard some persons arguing that since a well developed country like USA is also not free from corruption, how should one expect India to be so? Of course there is no scale to measure corruption quantitatively, but nevertheless, a comparison of this sort seems preposterous to me. It grossly obscures the reality. It seems to me like saying what is the difference between a people suffering from common cold and another suffering from tuberculosis, since both are not perfectly healthy?

By and large, corruption is very wide spread in all walks of public life in India. It is more a rule than an exception. Amount of corruption in different departments differ mostly in the extent of opportunities present for the corruption to be perpetrated.

Generally when we say a certain department of government is more corrupt, it simply means that the nature of the transaction in that department is such that corruption can be practiced more easily and safely.

Corruption is practiced in various forms and guises, like bribery in money and kind, nepotism, casteism, personal favors etc. In quite a few places, the practice is so entrenched that it looks like a part of normal transactions, so much so that it is openly discussed in official jargon.

To investigate the causes of this problem, we must recognize its nature first. This problem is not very specific in the sense of being confined to a certain part of the country, or to a certain section of the people or to a certain period of time. While its practice may be limited to government offices and business establishments, its influence emanates in all directions and permeates every strata of Indian life. It is not created due to any unforeseen accident of circumstances taking place like food crisis happening due to failure of expected rains. The potential of corruption is ever-present. It makes its ill effects manifest in all other human and national efforts. In that sense, it is the problem of all problems.

One of the chief reasons of prevailing corruption through the years is the appropriation by the government into itself of excessive powers to control various aspects of the lives of people. Before the advent of the British rulers, various parts of India were under autocratic rulers. There is no historical evidence of there being enlightened people under these rulers. Though the history does not deal with it, corruption must have flourished at the grass roots of the government. Even though the king may be good and just, it would have been virtually

impossible in those days of poor communications for him to know the real conditions prevailing in the branches of government directly in contact with the people. By necessity or choice, the king had to depend on the lesser officials of his kingdom to administer the people. Where no trickery and cruelty were considered out of bounds in order to capture throne or power at the highest levels of government, it would be unreasonable to assume that the lesser officials spared any corrupt practices for their personal ends. Even the king's courts, historical records indicate, were arena of personal favoritism. An almost complete lack of any popular resistance to the gradual establishment of the British rule in India only shows to what extent corruption had disenchanting the people and condemned the government to complete decadence.

The British organized the government on a new basis. They recognized that they were foreign and had no inherent roots in the native soil and people to draw their strength from. Their chief concern was to persist as rulers so that they could successfully exploit the subject nation. With this end in view, they built up, with remarkable ingenuity, an elaborate structure of administration. The main feature of this structure was a very systematic hierarchy of responsibilities and powers. This was to ensure that the directives from London were effectively carried out at all levels. During the early years of the British rule, neither the public were enlightened enough to clamor for, nor the rulers were anxious enough to accord, people's participation in the government. There was one thing that was vitally necessary for the foreign rule to survive and that was the strict maintenance of law and order - that is law and order as defined by the rulers. The British rulers fully realized that a vast country such as India cannot be exploited for long except under conveniently defined rules and laws, no matter what they were.

For this purpose and for effective implementation of directives from the top, they set up an administrative structure the core of which was what was called Indian Civil Service. Members of this service were selected on the basis of a competitive examination which ensured the entry of intelligent persons. In the beginning, the membership of this service was exclusively British. Later on, the Indians also gradually found entrance into it. But whatever their nationality, the members took extreme pride in their privileged position of belonging to the rulers rather than the ruled. Thus, by their mentality, training and intelligence, they proved highly efficient for the British design. Other government personnel of lesser powers and responsibilities formed an elaborate sub-structure around this core of administration. The concentration of powers and responsibilities in this core stemmed from the fact that the foreign rulers could not afford to trust the unquestionable loyalty of the vast army of the native people who manned the government offices. Obviously, it was impracticable to import persons of the ruling nationality to fill these offices. Even if it were possible, they were wise not to have done that. It would have aroused sooner tremendous native antagonism which would have considerably shortened the life of the British rule in India.

The governmental structure outlined above is a perfect set up for the corrupt practices to originate and thrive. The most significant feature of this structure from the point of view of corruption was the fact that the officials with real responsibility of administration were utterly inaccessible to the people. This inaccessibility was true not only in the physical sense, but perhaps more so in the psychological sense. The acquiescent public and the arrogant administrations were logically considered to belong to two entirely different communities.

Even social intercourse of any sort was considered as religiously prohibited between these two. In any given case, the facts on which these responsible officials had to base their decisions on were not first-hand but were as constructed by the hierarchical structure below them. The officials below them constituting this hierarchy were aware that the responsibility for whatever decisions are taken in a give case is not theirs. On the other hand, they also knew that they were in a position to influence these decisions by their prerogative of when and how to construct and present the case. They were assured of the effectiveness of their influence on account of the reliable insulation between the responsible official and the person or the people affected by his decision. Corruption is the inevitable result in such a situation.

It should be recognized that the physical and psychological separation of the officials with real powers and responsibilities from the public was envisaged and encouraged by the alien rulers for entirely different reasons. In the mixing of these officials with the people at the same level, they sensed a grave danger to their very existence as rulers in a far away land of people of dormant but potential feelings of self respect. They feared that the popular sentiments and resentment, by virtue of their moral appeal, might affect these officials in a manner which would prove detrimental to the continued imposition of colonial rule and economic exploitation. In such separation lay the hope of their survival. As far as the British members of this ruling community were concerned, they were in most aspects different from the people they governed, and hence such separation was more or less natural. It was not so in the case of Indian officials. This had to be created and sustained. Thanks to the moral consequences of the Indian history of the past centuries, the British rulers did not have to waste any efforts in

achieving this. Perhaps it is true that these highly placed officials, by and large, were not themselves corrupt in the usual sense of the term. That this separation gave rise to corruption did not bother the rulers as long as it suited their critical purpose.

Another feature of the British governmental structure responsible for corruption was the elaborate hierarchy of official functions and responsibilities. This system caused considerable delays in any governmental decisions which proceeded, with inevitably slow speed, from bottom upwards. This came to be popularly known as red-tape. This red-tape delay is a particularly suitable spawning ground for various maneuvers and manipulations necessarily required for underhand practices.

As I have noted earlier, this hierarchical feature of the government was introduced by the British rulers for their own essential needs and purposes. This hierarchical system was highly efficient and effective for any governmental action flowing from the top to the bottom. An order from Delhi to suppress any uprising in any remote corner of India could very promptly be carried out, but an application, left to itself, from an ordinary man may never reach even the district headquarters for action. This system allowing only one-way flow of actions was eminently suited to the British purposes.

The major factor contributing to corruption lay in the very purpose which motivates a foreign government to establish and maintain a colonial rule in a far away land. Obviously and understandably, the British did not come here from across the seven seas to promote the development and welfare of the Indian people. Undoubtedly, their main and dominant purpose which brought them here and encouraged them to gain increasing control of India was to exploit her economically to enhance the

prosperity of their own people. To achieve this objective, they must control all aspects, particularly economic, of Indian life, so that nothing which could even remotely harm their interests could function. This control could be gained either by force, as was the practice in old days, or through conveniently framed laws. It was wise, practical and in keeping with their own traditions to have chosen the second alternative. The result was an exhaustive set of rules and regulations embracing all the economic and political activities of the people. They did not interfere with the social aspect. Obviously, it hardly came in the way of their goal. The rules were framed not because they were needed to promote the welfare of the people or the economic development of the nation but because it was critically necessary to restrict, regulate and control the activities. As a matter of fact, in many cases these restrictive rules stifled the already lacking initiative of the people and kept the already lagging economy in check. Now, with the people whose morals were assaulted, battered and exhausted by the history of the past centuries, and who were smarting under the burden of the restrictive rules, corruption was not a moral question, it was a strategy of life and survival. They must somehow circumvent the law in order to live. Circumvention of law by corrupt practices of one sort or the other was an open secret and a fact of life. It was in the knowledge of the rulers. In spite of this, they wanted the laws to be there, in case there arose any emergent need to enforce them.

Corruption, particularly at the lower levels of the government, arose out of sheer necessity to grab extra money in order to supplement the meager salaries the petty government employees received. The difference in salaries between officials and employees at different levels of the government was astounding. To fully entrench the concept and practice of hierarchy in administration, so very essential for an alien rule,

marked differences in salary and status were ingeniously created and jealously maintained. On account of low salaries, corruption was righteously defended by most people and hence openly practiced. Anyway, it must be admitted that insufficiency of salary, by itself, was by no means the dominant cause of corruption, except perhaps in certain extreme cases. Various features of the government service during those days point in favor of this contention. First, insufficiency was interpreted differently in different situations. Some government officials thought their salary was insufficient to maintain a certain status and standard of life to which they belong by virtue of their being officials of a certain rank. Secondly, the magnitude of corruption was not determined by how much the salary was insufficient, but rather by how much opportunity existed for being corrupt. In most cases, a government position carrying less salary but a good scope for corruption was preferable to one with the opposite features.

The reason I have gone, in some detail, into pointing out those features of the British administration which helped grow corruption is that they are essential to the understanding the present situation. It would be wrong to conclude that the British rulers intentionally wanted to promote corruption. There is evidence to show that most British officials had strong aversion to it. But the point I want to make is that the administrative system they devised for their own ends proved highly conducive to the growth of corruption. Whether their ends were equitable is entirely a different matter. I would say that the British rule in India was perhaps an inevitable step in the inexorable march of history. Conceding this inevitability, it must also be logically conceded that the administrative structure they put up was a necessity. Perhaps any colonial rulers, particularly as ingenious as the British, would have done the same. That this structure led

to corruption in the government services was something that they did not plan for and something they did not care for.

The situation regarding corruption in post-independence era is a direct extension of the one created and existing during the foreign rule. Of course, this extension is affected in various ways by the new forces released and new situations created due to independence. But at the core of all this lies the legacy of what existed during the long years of colonial rule. It is generally said that free India was fortunate in inheriting a well established and efficient administrative system from the former British rulers. A nation of teeming millions and riddled with diverse problems witnessed a remarkable absence of anarchy and lawlessness after the transference of powers from the British rulers of long standing into the comparatively inexperienced hands of the Indian leaders. The success and efficiency with which fledgling India tackled the tremendous problems coming in the wake of the reluctant but unavoidable partition are amazing. But this success should not blind us to the faults and basic inadequacies of our governmental system which are proving serious handicaps to the nation's progress today. Let us analyze our initial success a little but more realistically.

The whole psychological atmosphere prevailing in the country at the time of independence accounts for much of the success our government achieved. The basis of the non-violent Indian struggle for freedom was arousing the masses to long forgotten feelings of national self-respect and responsibility. The leaders of the struggle divined - and very correctly so - that the moment these feelings, raised to a sufficiently high pitch, become wide-spread, any foreign rule would be rendered impossible. When India became free, people were full of enthusiasm. The leadership at the top and throughout the

country, having fought the freedom struggle under the banner of one well organized party and under the guidance of the towering personality of Gandhi was highly united and monolithic. People, enamored by the leaders who were fired by high ideals of sacrifice throughout the long-drawn struggle deeply respected them. They were ready to do anything at the call of these leaders. All the ranks and files of the ruling party, from top to bottom, were strongly united in the common desire to prove to the world and particularly to the former rulers that India was in fact able to govern itself. Under such circumstances, the government's comparative success in tackling the initial problems, terrible as they were, is no wonder. When communal passions and frenzies were raging throughout the nation, it is doubtful whether the administration left to itself would have effectively dealt with the situation had it not been for the magic influence on the Indian people of the deeply adored leaders.

Apart from this basic reason, the performance of the bureaucratic machinery during the initial years of post-independence India was satisfactory due to several factors. In the first place, the problems that India confronted, gigantic as they were, were typical of what the Indian bureaucracy was trained to deal with. Suppression of communal riots, rehabilitation of displaced persons and the like, they all required executing the orders passed from the top. Moreover, the bureaucrats themselves could not remain unaffected by the vibrant atmosphere swaying the country. They were more than anxious to prove that they could be as much loyal to the new leaders as to the old masters. They desperately needed to win the confidence of those in whose persecution they were instrumental not long ago.

But now, almost two decades after the exciting event of

independence, things in India have gradually but surely changed. The popular excitement and enthusiasm following independence have cooled down. People's expectations of dramatic amelioration of their conditions, after having attained what they considered the ultimate goal, have given way to despair and disappointment. Great leaders commanding nationwide respect have gone out of the scene, by death or otherwise. Lesser leaders, who were drawn to the independence struggle under the spell of the great leaders, are losing that spell which bound them to the national cause. The governmental machinery has resiled to its usual form after a temporary stress of new circumstances. Now is the high time to examine dispassionately the question of why the government functions the way it does.

(This article was written in 1965 when the author had been in the USA for a year during his four-year stay there for higher studies)