

# Corruption: India in the Coils of a Python



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## Abstract

*Corruption does not breed in a vacuum. Nor does it arise out of nothing. There is a definite motivational urge behind corruption, spreading its tentacles far and wide like an octopus. These are need and greed, necessity and allurements. Need-based corruption is the most common form of corruption the common man is victimized and exploited by the corrupt and greedy petty government functionary whose duty it is to provide essential services. Those working in the electricity department or waterworks are more prone to indulging in this form of corruption. The situation is so bad that even in the flagship schemes of government of India such as National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS), it is said that about one-fourth of the people living below the poverty line got employment by paying bribe to "the local representative." There is greater corruption in services that are need based than basic services. The rich and the affluent have alternate sources of satisfying their needs but the poor and destitute have nowhere to go except to pay something extra to get their needs and requirements fulfilled by government functionaries. The systemic failure argument is usually trotted out by those who are status quoists. One way of cleansing public utility services is by introducing an element of competition in services. Once it starts shrinking, one can imagine a day when it will completely vanish and pave the way for better times.*

## Motivational Urges

Corruption does not breed in a vacuum. Nor does it arise out of nothing. There is a definite motivational urge behind corruption, spreading its tentacles far and wide like an octopus. It is also like a python in whose coils, a polity/ society is sucked. The point is what are the motivational urges behind runaway corruption. Taken on the face value, two urges appear imminent and essential. These are need and greed, necessity and allurements. This makes corruption either need based or greed-based. The two are separate and different but their effect is the same. Either way they promote corruption and are causal to it.

Need-based corruption is the most common form of corruption in which ordinary citizens indulge in for no fault of theirs and are indeed its victims in as much as the dearth of essential

services motivates them to promote this form of corruption. As a matter of fact, the common man is victimized and exploited by the corrupt and greedy petty government functionary whose duty it is to provide essential services but being a deliberate shirker, he can make citizen's life miserable by sheer non-performance of his duty. Those working in the electricity department or waterworks are more prone to indulging in this form of corruption. Electricity and water supply affect all individuals alike, be they rich or poor. But whereas the rich being more resourceful can manage to survive without these services for a couple of days by generating electricity through a generator or using water stored in their underground tank, the poor have no such choice or facility and have to depend solely on the petty government functionary. A little variation

in electricity or water meter may cause a steep rise in the bill or a little snag in service may cause electricity failure to darken his home or prevent water supply to disrupt his daily routine. The poor needs regular, uninterrupted water and electricity, howsoever small in quantity, to maintain his daily work schedule on which depends his life. He cannot afford any stoppage in his daily work schedule since it is linked with his bread-earning capacity. He needs prompt redressal of his grievances if the electric line develops a snag or water supply is choked. It is these commoners who have to bear the brunt of non-supply of electricity and water. Then have to depend upon the petty government functionary who by a delay of a day or two can upset their daily schedules and put their life in disarray. He has to pay petty bribe to obtain urgent service in an uninterrupted way because the lack of this service affects his earning capacity and he does not have enough spare time to indulge in the luxury of reminding the government servant of his 'duty' to the people and get rebuffed and suffer in silence. He cannot afford to run from pillar to post in search of a conscientious officer who will attend to his services. Per force he has to grease the palms of petty government servants to obtain regular supply of services. This is his need and this makes corruption inevitable for the sake of his survival needs. The GNDP report calls greed grand and need, "Petty".<sup>1</sup> But no matter by what name you call it, corruption is India's greatest failure, according to P.C. Alexander, the former Principal Secretary to the Prime Minister.<sup>2</sup>

The ubiquity of corruption in government services so anguished the two distinguished judges of Supreme Court Justices Katju and Thakur that on October 10, 2010, they observed painfully that one might as well fix the rates for getting public services performed.<sup>3</sup> Justices G.S. Singhvi and C.K. Prasad even observed that if senior officers of the government refrained from indulging in graft, India's name would disappear in the list of most corrupt countries.<sup>4</sup> In fact, the sad reality is that high government officials top the list of bribe takers and this is the

single largest factor that has restrained the pace of development in post independence India,"<sup>5</sup> observes P.C. Alexander.

The situation is so bad that even in the flagship schemes of government of India such as National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS), it is said that about one-fourth of the people living below the poverty line got employment by paying bribe to "the local representative."<sup>6</sup> Police is perhaps the only department where bribe is paid directly to the bribe-taker, whereas in other departments, this is done through the middle man, who passes it off to the main functionary, after obtaining a minor share of the bribe himself as his facilitation fee.

There is reason, why those in high public services are vulnerable to this abuse. It is the nature of services and their essentiality that makes them monopolistic in the field of receiving bribes. Indeed, the monopolistic nature of some services which are performed only by the government and not by the private agencies, clothes them with a degree of essentiality and that makes them bribe prone. The electricity and water Departments, rail and postal departments to name a few have a monopolistic hold on certain services and then cannot be dispensed with and hence when it comes to obtaining services, one has to bribe. Ever since private courier services started, corruption in postal department came down. The same is the case of Air India and Indian Airlines whose monopolistic hold on aviation declined when the private players were allowed to use Indian sky. With that, corruption in ticket booking declined. For that matter, even the use of new technology can reduce the incidence of corruption. For instance, computerization of railway ticket and online booking has reduced corruption even in railways which at one time was seething with corruption and the railways were experimenting with new modes of reducing corruption such as by employing ladies booking clerks in the illusory hope that women are less vulnerable to the disease of corruption.

### Outreach on Corruption

If one looks at the corruption index of Indian public services, one finds that there is greater corruption in services that are need based than basic services. Basic services being too universal are in any case performed and their non-performance touches every section of society including even habitual and frequent bribe-takers but need based services affect the commoners more than the elite class and hence they are the one most affected by the virus of bribe. The rich and the affluent have alternate sources of satisfying their needs but the poor and destitute have nowhere to go except to pay something extra to get their needs and requirements fulfilled by government functionaries.

Many findings were made to identify the causes of corruption and one basic and causal factor encouraging corruption is public indifference or apathy is the middle man. The middleman's menace has grown so strong that most consumers are either afraid or habitually disinclined to make a complaint against bribe takers. Indeed, by paying a little bribe, like a locale cess, they feel that they save a lot of time and energy. An ordinary man & time-starved and hence prefers to pay bribe to save time in which he earns.

Corruption Reports:- Transparency International India (TII), provides funds to agencies to conduct surveys and make reports. In 2005, a report was prepared on the common man, the Aam Admi,<sup>7</sup> while the one prepared in 2007, centred around some BPL (below the poverty line) families. The 2009 survey focused on voters and the 2010 survey was related to public services in the states.

An interesting example of how high authorities tackle corruption & provided by Bhaskara Rao in his book on Good Governance where he narrates an incident relating to N.Vittal, Chief Vigilance Commission (CVC) who finding a good number of touts in full operation outside

the Delhi Development Authority (DDA) building, which was next to his own office, intervened to stop this malpractice. He was amazed to see a number of unauthorized touts, sitting on the road, with service placards soliciting customers to avail of their services in DDA for a price. They were middlemen pretending to be an unofficial charge of various services of DDA. Most aggrieved citizens would approach them, pay some fee and get their work done, N. Vittal brought this to the notice of the DDA authorities and the touts were thrown away from the footpaths of the road outside DDA.<sup>8</sup> Since the complaint came from a high ranking official like CVC, the DDA had no option but to attend to it promptly and remove the touts forthwith from the pavements. But if an aggrieved citizen would have brought it to the notice of DDA, nothing would have happened because the touts operated with full connivance and consent of DDA officials and were the convenient conduits for bribe to flow smoothly. It was a convenient unofficial link between the officers, and the consumers. Can more officers be motivated to follow the example of CVC N. Vittal, so that corruption at other levels too is eradicated? The pity is that most functionaries of civic bodies are found reluctant to apply transparent and focused methods to get over the disease of corruption. Doing so means facilitating the process of drying up the sources of easy earning. There are various other departments that are similarly afflicted by this disease. The clerks in judicial and revenue courts take small bribes to give suitable dates in pending cases, providing copies of orders and judgments and facilitating unofficial inspection of files. Hospitals, income tax and sales tax departments and other similar service providers to are not immune from this virus.

Reforming the System:- Any attempt at cleansing the Augean stable is beset with difficulties, both perceptual as well as operational. It has somehow become a perception of all and sundry, commoners and

reformers that getting rid of corruption in a country as big, vast and complex as India, is a herculean task because corruption has got into the DNA of people. Somehow it has become outrageous to talk of corruption in a country like India where the general perception is that the country has become corruption proof and hence any talks of eradicating corruption is at best imaginary and utopian. It has long ceased to shock the conscience to the country. Peoples sensibilities have been relentlessly attacked and dulled by motivated and contrived justification such as that corruption is a global phenomenon. People have started living by such stereotypes and even go to the extent of citing examples from developed nations such as Japan, South Korea, Thailand and others to drive home the point that corruption as a global phenomenon, has acquired a universality and ubiquity that defies logic and cannot be wished away. People who take a ringside view of corruption are appalled by its enormity in terms of size and universality in application and operations and are disinclined to believe that a remedy is in our sight to ensure its early exit. They call it by the fashionable and more acceptable name of "systemic failure". This is such a handy excuse and alibi that the moment one comes across any instance of a policeman accepting bribe, the accusation & immediately hurled at the system, holding it to be the main culprit.

The question arises- is the system to blame or the people who run it? The politicians cleverly try to save themselves by maintaining that they are but a small part of the system and the latter comprises many others such as bureaucrats, influence peddlers, business magnets, trade tycoons and others who are all to collectively blame and only politicians should not be singled out for the malaise creeping into the system. When such excuses are being offered, the common man in sheer disgust surrenders to the inevitable and prepares himself to pay the bribe. He gets convinced that corruption in India

is a demon who is difficult to be conquered and vanquished in a civilian battle. Each individual has a work programme that he wants to continue with in a hassle free manner and this can be accomplished only by treating bribe giving as a routinised part of business. He is forced to nourish a system which he at once abhors and intends to get over it. But his difficulty is that it has become too routinised and widespread to be taken on single-handedly.

The systemic failure argument is usually trotted out by those who are status quoists. Those who benefit by the continuance of status quo take all steps to preserve and converse it for their own purpose. After all laws and rules must be bent to benefit some corrupt people. The average individual is not upset by this kind of foul practice because he is not a reformist. He is a commoner who is interested in getting his work done and hence can go to any length to appease an errant officer who runs the system.

One way of cleansing public utility services is by introducing an element of competition in services to break their monopoly of services. As stated earlier, by allowing private airlines to fly alongside the national carrier, things have improved a lot in the aviation sector. So is the case of postal department where the private courier service has made a big difference. But not everywhere this is possible. There are services like judiciary and income tax where a rival infallibility cannot be created to break any existing monopoly. Here computerization and technology has to be improved to get better results. However one thing is certain. Unless civic-minded persons join hands and act as a determined group to eradicate corruption, this battle cannot be won. The sting operation technology can go a long way in eliminating corruption. Today this can be done through a mobile phone also. Unless more and more culprits are apprehended, the incidence of corruption in public services cannot be brought down. This is a long battle and none should feel that it is lost before it began. What is needed is

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a sustained and coordinated effort. Even if one cannot completely eradicate it, one can reduce its quantum, tame it and contain it within manageable limits. Once It starts shrinking, one can imagine a day when it will completely vanish and pave the way for better times. Let us not lose hope and fall into despair. Howsoever long and tortuous the road, one can always cross it. There is always an end of the tunnel.

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