

Public participation in war against corruption

Unless it is addressed adequately by spiritual, emotional, and legislative means, taming corruption shall remain a distant dream



To summarize, corruption is a consequence of individual greed. Photo: AFP

The following illustrative contexts indicate the extent of corruption in public life:

—Hawkers on pavements of public roads pay routine protection money to various government entities to run their businesses. Routine approvals and permits for construction of houses by an individual citizen require an “independent licence fee” to be paid to relevant entities. Awarding contracts is influenced by additional considerations.

—The innovative concept of shared taxi/auto introduced in several Indian cities needs the blessings of the concerned department, which are received against explicit consideration.

—Inter-state travellers (using tourist vehicles with permit from either origin or destination state) need to pay “speed money” at the relevant check-posts en route to minimize harassment and delay.

—Access to public health facilities requires an additional fee and there is no guarantee of quality care. Access to higher education in

private professional educational institutions requires additional payment besides the prescribed fees.

—Welfare schemes launched by the State routinely provide additional source of income to intermediaries. As they say, there is a revenue opportunity in drought and a bigger one in floods.

The above examples emphasize the deep-rooted malice of corruption in our public life caused by the complete failure of the government systems in providing equitable quality services at an affordable price, and compounded by poor legislation, an indifferent bureaucracy, and fractured judiciary, with power hungry politicians adding fuel to the fire. The common man has no option but to purchase products and services as per the terms and conditions decided by the system. In this backdrop, we explore the role of public participation in eradicating corruption from the public domain.

The logic of corruption

The political dispensation sets the tone for formulation and implementation of public policies. The bureaucracy and the judiciary, by and large, work in consonance with the expectations of the elected representatives without compromising their respective independence. Political leadership has a fixed contractual term of five years, leading to a need to get re-elected once every five years. Mobilizing public opinion in favour of a political party requires deployment of significant resources. Every political party nurtures a brand. Managing the affairs of a political party during, before, and after elections is expensive. Political parties patronize think-tanks to propagate chosen ideologies. All these require resources. When there is a compelling urge to return to power, means are found to mobilize resources. Soon after Independence, a career in politics was considered to be an opportunity to serve the country and improve the quality of life of fellow citizens. From this, we have moved to a situation where a political career is considered akin to any other business career, influenced by the magnitude of resources that can be deployed. Corruption helps mobilize the needed resources.

Community action centers

The bargaining power of a common man against the State is marginal. Often a common man needs a product, service, or protection from the system. In the absence of adequate redressal mechanism, a common man has no option but to surrender to the system. He is concerned with the cost, time and implications of not following the flow of the system versus the ease with which the operations can be carried out by surrendering to the system’s demands. Expecting him to initiate action by which the system can be changed is unrealistic (unless he is a Mahatma). Communities can possibly play a greater role in resisting corrupt practices in matters of common interest. Local leaders with good intentions and impeccable reputation can play a vital role in restoring a balance in how the system affects day to day activities of community members. Community action groups can serve as a single focal point of contact to oversee development projects. They can celebrate lives of people who succeed with integrity, promote the importance of integrity and honesty in individuals’ lives, and amplify the negative consequences of corruption.

The system is likely to resist such a change and restrain such affirmative community actions. But if nurtured by the communities, such community action groups could potentially replace governing bodies of the villages. Networking among the community action centers can

bring about changes in fielding and selecting elected representatives with a bias for integrity and transparency. Such a process would eventually bring titanic changes in the political dispensation.

Combatting corruption through education

Corruption in public space is a manifestation of greed of an individual for power, position, and wealth. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi said, "there is enough for everybody's need, but may not be sufficient to meet the greed of individuals". Although enabling provisions, community actions and adequate legislation can all play an important role in containing corruption, real change would happen only when individuals are able to manage their greed. Former president A.P.J. Abdul Kalam said, "The biggest punishment for corrupt parents is rejection of them by their own children." Thus, corruption can only be curbed at the individual level when the younger generation is groomed with righteous thoughts in the context of individuals, community and society. This should begin at the primary school and be furthered by the secondary school education. At the higher education level, righteous thoughts should be nurtured by inspirational and motivational speeches and through interactions with public personalities with impeccable integrity. Though punishment and penal actions delivered quickly are effective deterrents to corruption, a lot more will be achieved by inspiring the young generation to lead a life that combines righteousness and honesty. One way to achieve this is to celebrate the life and accomplishments of honest and successful people at various levels.

To summarize, corruption is a consequence of individual greed. Unless it is addressed adequately by spiritual, emotional, and legislative means, taming corruption shall remain a distant dream. Just as charity begins at home, honesty should breed from home. If the elder generation is not ready to propagate these ideas, the younger generation should take the lead. However, the honest common man can do little on his own. Community action networks can play an important role in curbing corruption. Well-coordinated community action groups could eventually replace corrupt governance systems (fulfilling Gandhi's dream). The network of community action groups would be the base on which India can identify honest political leaders to govern herself.

N. Ravichandran and N. Sundaravalli are faculty members of the Indian Institute of Management Ahmedabad. Views expressed are personal and do not represent those of IIM Ahmedabad.