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LET'S MAKE IT WORK



CRUSHING CORRUPTION

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A pinch of corruption

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**CRUSHING
CORRUPTION**



Anil K Gupta

There has been a tremendous upsurge of social revulsion in the country about corruption. People wonder why the conscience of so-called leaders is not troubled by their betrayal of public trust. Corruption seems to be like a vaccine; once you learn to live with a small dose, a bigger dose becomes easier to live with. More and more people seem to have been immunised by this vaccine. How have cultures lived with this problem over millennia? In Indian culture, how much falsehood or misdemeanour can be tolerated is illustrated through a simple proportion: as much as the salt that one mixes in flour while making bread. More than that has not been tolerated. How did proportions change?

Bribing begins at home and in childhood. Parents bribe children to behave well, not because that is the right thing to do or that their own conduct would warrant that, but because they offer inducements or rewards for good behaviour. Slowly and slowly, this becomes a game of one-upmanship, who can cheat whom with what degree of smartness. As time passes, we teach children about the smart ways of cutting corners. Readers might not have forgotten the case in which parents managed to show fractures which children did not have so that 'smart writers' could write exam for them and get them passed.

There are many kinds of corruption: a) keeping quiet when one sees injustice and non-meritocratic decision-making system in place (to some extent we are all guilty of this crime, else how do we explain so much of mediocrity in academic world?).



People who may not have worthy publications, or creditable teaching record getting 'good' positions is possible because a lot of people buy peace, become indifferent and keep quiet when they should be speaking out; b) not complaining when one sees people using public positions or resources for private or sectarian interest; c) misallocating resources i.e. things meant for 'x' given to undeserving or out-of-queue 'y'; d) taking advantage of ignorance or gullibility of common people; e) not declaring full sales or other figures to avoid taxes; f) paying bribe to get one's due because providers want to extract rent out of unwillingness of needy persons to wait or fulfil requirements in time; g) converting a public position to ignore or mask the ineligibility of resource seekers; h) taking rent out of scarcity of supplies, and so on.

No one solution will address the injustice and unfairness of different kinds. To suggest that most people are corrupt though to varying extent will not do any

more. That is because most people are not corrupt. Recently when a group of students in GRIIT course being taught by me and APJ Abdul Kalam at IIMA suggested a corruption ambulance or helpline, there was a huge interest among the students as well as outsiders to connect with that effort. But such efforts need tremendous back-up support of willing experts who will remove informational asymmetry, mediate when injustice is being done and have the courage to suffer if need arises so that the disadvantaged people are not denied their due.

Creating policies or procedures which exclude the deserving people systematically is also injustice, the procedural one. When we use such criteria which weigh factors with which some groups are inherently better endowed, then moral injustice can also be done. One can be morally corrupt but procedurally

correct. Let me recall a story which Arun Agarwal shared with me during his thesis work in late 1980s. In a Rajasthan village, a poacher was caught cutting branches of a tree from common land for private use though it was not allowed. The assembly of the three villages which had rights to that common land met and debated whether the poacher was in dire need of wood, was it the first time he did it, did he have some other problem which forced him to break law etc. Finally, he was punished. He was asked to feed two and a half kg of grains to birds standing barefoot under the sun in a desert. What was the reason for such a punishment? What was the community trying to communicate to the poacher and the rest of the community? What will such a punishment imply about morality of mistakes and ability to correct them? Let me await your responses before I share my thoughts next fortnight. ■

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