

CORRUPTION: A PANORAMIC VIEW

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Corruption, an issue that the world and particularly India has been talking about at length recently is a veteran player. Dictionaries define corruption as spiritual or moral impunity or deviation form ideal. Embezzlement of public funds is certainly corruption but its bounds are not restricted only to this. Before we proceed to discuss its various dimensions, implication, causes, consequences, control measures, their loop holes and ways and means to plug a few of them, I would like to bring an interesting fact to light.

It had existed as manipulated Sophistry during the days of Socrates and Plato, as the rising rigidity of Caste system during the later Vedic period to suite the requirements and luxuries of the learned and powerful. It existed during the pre- renaissance phase of Europe in the form of church power to curb the spirit of inquiry and scientific temperament. An example could be cited in the moral impunity against Galileo who faced social boycott because of his heliocentric proposition.

Literature and cinema are actually a reflection of society. In this context it is interesting to find how Kalidas, a scholar in the court of the Gupta ruler Chandragupta Vikramaditya has given the subtle example of corruption in his work 'Abhigyan Shakuntalam'. He narrates the story of the ring of Dushyanta that was lost by Shankuntala and was later recovered from a fisherman. After seeing the ring the king bestows many luxuries upon the fisherman. Over here the fisherman is seen parting from half of his wealth to soldiers who had caught hold of him. Their conversation smalls of extortion and hence corruption

I would like to cite example of Shakespeare's famous character Shylok from the Merchant of Venice. His devious methods as a money lender and his demand for a pound of flesh from Antonio's heart stinks corruption.

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Shakespeare's another play Julius Caesar shows example of a man Masala who was a slave .Upon the death of his master he is seen fleeing from the battle field to regain his freedom from the moral impunity and corruption that had been inflicted upon him in form of slavery.

During Second World War we see examples of women from several Asian countries like Thailand, Cambodia, etc. being forced to prostitution in the Japanese military Camps. These are examples of extreme moral impunity and moral corruption at the hands of human kind.

Holocaust (Systematic State Sponsored murder), a creation of Hitler that led to the killing of thousand of Jews, curbing of the Bengali Muslims of East Pakistan who were being forced to abandon Bengali and recognize Urdu and were not being treated at par politically are examples of political impunity and hence corruption.

Not many days have passed since the killing of LTTE chief. But today several voices are being raised that the Sri Lankan government has failed to offer the promised life conditions to its Tamil citizens. Such human rights violation if stand true, are certainly huge examples of political and moral impunity and hence corruption.

I would like to draw your attention to the much talked, discussed, hyped war against terrorism led by United States. On one hand we have the so called Jihadis who in the pretext of saving their religion kill innocents in various parts of the world. Mumbai Blasts 1993, Jaipur blasts, Mumbai blasts of Nov,2008, Pune Bakery blasts, Zaveri Bazaar blasts (Mumbai) are all examples that demonstrate moral impunity to the fullest. But alarming and threatening is the fact that even the war against it has shown regular signs of corruption. Recent incident of burning copies of Quran in NATO Camps in Afghanistan are conspicuous examples of spiritual impunity.

Friends when I talk of examples of moral and spiritual impunity that pervades the terrorist groups, let us keep this in mind that this is not restricted to any particular region or religion, examples of Malegaon blasts, the neo- Nazi groups, Palestinian extremist groups amply state the case.

Women's day, women empowerment: these are the words in vogue these days. But the very fact that they hold such huge significance highlights the misery, the sufferings, the discrimination, the brutal unethical dominance that they have under gone. Sati, jauhar, female infanticide, feticide, dowry, domestic violence, discrimination in offering education faculties, unequal pay to women labourers, rampant cases of molestation, rapes, harassment in work life, 2011 census showing huge gender imbalance (940 to 1000 males) clearly show the corruption that they have suffered. Some of these problems stand corrected and some are yet in pipeline. But dreadful is the approach. Having realized that to empower women they should be offered reservations in legislatures, the bill seeking 1/3rd reservation for women in parliament stands pending for about 4 years. I believe this is evidence ample to state that political corruption is still let loose.

Talking of corruption, no discussion can probably ignore apartheid movement. Discriminating against people on the ground of their skin complexion was another horrifying story of corruption. South Africa in those days of 1894 was a country where even paying the price could not buy Mahatma a first class train ticket. On one of his trips he was forced to sit on a foot board, on another he was thrown out of the train. The law of the land demanded only the blacks to enroll themselves, carry their enrolment numbers where ever they go. They were not allowed to cross from one city to the other without prior permission and were told to get their marriages registered else these marriages were declared illegal and all these laws were meant only for the blacks. This was certainly cruel, brutal, immoral and corrupt.

The evolving world dynamics gave way to democracy. It started to flourish in various regions. But what was humiliating about the process was the fact that a system widely cherished on the pretext that it allows the masses to choose for them was hugely discriminating. Voting rights were offered and

restricted on the grounds of gender, property, ethnicity etc. So the brutal fact remains that this evolution was also not left untouched by corruption.

But before I move on I would like to remind you of a fact. Our country gained its independence in 1947 and was suffering from huge problems ranging from poverty to illiteracy. It had to evolve and keep together people from various ethnicities, linguistic diversities, castes, classes, various princely states etc. But the visionaries showed huge faith in the citizens and it offered adult suffrage to all citizens without making any discrimination. So the point is that there is corruption but it does not mean that there can be no scope for optimism. Now before we take up the case of India in greater detail I would like to drive home a few points.

- (a)Corruption is not restricted to a region, country ethnicity.
- (b)Corruption is not an event of just our generation. It has existed even in the remote past. It has only varied in its domain and extent of influence. Similarly has existed the fight against corruption.
- (c)Corruption is not just about embezzling money, giving and taking bribes. Though monetary aspect of corruption is by far the greatest eye catcher in today's scenario.

Corruption even in India has seen several variants in different time. I will try and quickly rap up few examples form the past and then we will see the recent past two decades in some detail.

British Raj: The economic exploitation of the country at the hands of British, huge discrimination in offering important posts and influencing powers to the Indians in the pretext of good administration, hugely impoverished conditions of the peasants, landless tillers caused by corrupt tax collection practices, immense suppression of the tribal people making them homeless and remorseless in that very land to which they are probably the oldest inhabitants, the atrocities inflicted upon the mill worker's that came to light especially during the Ahmedabad Mill workers' strike, are all examples of corruption.

Corrupt and devious were the ideas of creating a split in the masses on the lines of religion. Corrupt were their reforms that offered goodies and incentives to those who would forget nationalist sentiments and align themselves to the discriminatory, devious, mal- intentioned British rule.

Corrupt were the Rowlett Act, Marshall how, Jalliahwala Massacre and the British Commission established subsequently to carry out the investigation. Corrupt was salt law and the illegitimate practice of forcing farmers to grow indigo. Champaran, rather this entire land where we stand is a witness to this. So to cut the long story short the entire journey of the subcontinent is marred with substantial examples of corruption .After independence the visionaries had their varied plans for the infant independent country. Pandit Nehru viewed the industrial plants as the 'modern' temples of India, embarked with a plan to give impetus to capital intensive industry. To put it simply the idea was to invest in heavy industries etc. that would generate big machines, power plant equipments. Such investment would mean greater capacity building for the years to come, these initial investments would make the country capable of generating implements that would help spur growth in other sectors subsequently. Such investment would not generate profits instantaneously but was to be fruitful in the long run. It was felt that private players would normally be eager to make instantaneous profits. Further depending on them would mean monopoly. So, several public sector enterprises were set up. The result was huge govt. funds, enormous avenues for investment and hence huge scope for embezzlement.

Power, transportation, irrigation, public works, and several others sectors became hubs for embezzlement. Stories of embezzlement and allegations become common. Those who stayed aloof from such malpractices got recognition as exception. To eliminate these irregularities tendering procedures were brought to practice but to no great effect. Several ingenious methods were devised. Nomination basis, technical expertise, intimidating new vendors, previous track record was all used as pretext to go the corrupt way. Audits, vigilance etc. were the methods devised to put a check on these.

But glitches in these have also been reported from time to time. What is more surprising is the fact that even CVO, the acme of the vigilance ladder has not stayed untouched of the claws of corruption. Charges against Mr. P.J. Thomas in the palmolein case have raised several questions against the legitimacy of the entire setup.

As I had earlier discussed literature and cinema are a reflection of society. I would digress a little from current Indian Scenario and would like to walk you through a few examples in each of them.

We have seen a few examples of literature earlier. I would like to give you a few examples from cinema. Hope my young audience will find it interesting to relate to.

Zamindari and money lending systems that existed in the past in our country were epitomes of atrocities and corruption. The movie “Mother India” has tried to aptly bring this fact to light. The money lender’s cunningness is brought to light and the movie beautifully portrays how the money borrowed by the poor farmer family is used to oppress even the next generation by the lender’s wicked means. The movie also aptly shows conflict of morality and motherly love of a young widow at the hands of a corrupt and lascivious money lender.

During the early days of independent India the visionaries felt that the resources of the country were scarce. Need was felt these resources should be used to serve the needs of the masses and not the luxuries of a few. So the result was licensing. The idea was to regulate production, inventory, export etc. of various goods. But the fact of the situation was that we had actually created a Frankenstein monster. These licenses were even acquired by the people who had absolutely nothing to do with that business. E.g. a businessman with some political clout and some money to offer as bribe might even take license for export of garments even if he is not remotely associated with garment business. The obvious question is “why”.

Friends it was acquired to be subsequently sold to other businessmen illegally. The idea was to serve as middleman and gain brokerage with limited licenses for production and greater demand. In the market rose the problem of black marketing.

I am pretty sure that words “black marketing” and compromise on quality will immediately remind about the *Public distribution System*. This menace of black marketing continues even to this day.

During the early days expenditure on import of luxurious items like electronic goods and gold etc. was not promoted by the govt. policies. The result was heavy custom duty on the import of such items. This led to another way of corruption. Bribing custom officers to evade the actual taxes was one. The other was smuggling. Let us talk a little again about movies.

The exchange of briefcases along with code-words and ships smuggling gold were a common sight in the 60s cinema. Ajit Khan and his famous dialogue “saara shahar hume lion ke naam se janta hai” might bring some memories.

Talking further movies like *Corporate* exhibit high degree of moral and spiritual impunity. The movie exhibits a Swami who exercises great clout in political and business sphere. Friends this is not mere exaggeration. Examples like Chandra Swami and Dheerendra Brahmachari amply state the case. Lustful attitude of the politicians that the movie displays causes several people to frown. People say that such topics do not suite requirements of family audience. Friends I agree, but what disturbs me is the fact that we try to protect our families from such cinema when in this country we see such lascivious conduct in legislative assemblies. Mind you friends these are our elected representatives. This obviously is moral impunity and corrupt behavior.

The examples like that of M/s Satyam headed by Mr. Ramalinga Raju is another huge story of corruption. What further surprises is the role of the audit firm, PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC). A common man can very well figure a discrepancy of even a few thousands in his account. How “come

such big multi-nationals not figure” a discrepancy in the tune of hundreds of crores. This is moral impunity and crime not just against the stakeholders but it kills the confidence of everyone.

“Khosla ka ghosla” talks about the land-mafiyas. Friends I need not reiterate that this is corruption as it uses goons, monetary power and all sorts of illegal means to curb the rightful owner.

A recent movie “Pan Singh Tomar”, a true story, shows how bad administrative system and corrupt officers spoil the life of a talented and dedicated man along with his kin.

So for a change we talked a lot about movies.

Moving further when we look at the past two and a half decades there are several cases like Bofors scam, Palmolein scam, Harshad Mehta scam, Hawala scam, Ketan Parikh scam, Telgi’s stamp scam and several others. Past few years have seen several huge corruption cases like 2G spectrum scam, NREGA scam, NRHM scam in Uttar Pradesh, Adarsh Society scam, mining scams and many more.

We know about them, have discussed them and have lamented their occurrence. It is important to evaluate the path ahead.

- a. Where does the root cause of corruption lie?
- b. What measures have been taken to fight against corruption?
- c. Will these measures suffice?

There are certainly few lacunas in the system. People have voiced their concern against them. Public disclosure bill and protection of the person making the disclosure bill, Lokpal bill etc. are all legislative measures that are in pipeline.

I further feel that new legislation though essential does not meet the requirement as a standalone measure. There is huge requirement to improve the execution at all levels of functioning. The moral of the citizens would have been upbeat today had the functioning of CVO (P J Thomas), CBI (in various cases ranging from Bofors to cash for vote case) had not been brought under regular media scanner for wrong reasons.

There is provision for fast track courts in the country for cases that have special significance to the country. But the misery is that even fast tracing has not been able to deliver justice in several countless cases.

I firmly believe that never has any system been fool-proof. Doing further legislations is going to improve the system but only legislations cannot eliminate corruption. To give you an example Mr. Ketan Parikh did a scam in stock market that did not amount to any huge crime as per the law-books though it ill-effected life of many adversely.

Bottom line is that one has to inculcate morals on an individual basis. As it is said in Sanskrit.....