

**‘The beauty of corruption is that, it converts any act of being into something which is rentable’**

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### **What is corruption and what are the various forms of corruption?**

Before I tell you about what is corruption, you have to be clear about what it is not, because one of the things that has happened, especially in social science today, and especially with the kind of new modernisation going on, by World Bank, by Transparency International, corruption is always seen as a pathology; corruption is always seen as a form of deviancy; corruption is seen as something which you should not do. I think what I want to first emphasise is the normalcy of corruption. You have to understand that corruption is structural. A great emphasis has been laid so far on character building and what it means not to pay a bribe, which is a sign of good character. Or it is seen as some kind of legislative act which eliminates something.

What I want to show you is that corruption is totally structural. When a nation tries to classify its society into dualistic compartments—informal, formal, oral, written—what it does is, entry from one end of the classification to the other. Say, from the informal economy to the formal, from country to town, these kind of entries have gatekeepers. So, corruption is essentially an information economy, long before the idea of an information economy was born. Corruption controls position, space as rent. And as long as you have gatekeepers who control access to entitlements, corruption is going to be there. Corruption is basically what you pay for your right.

Corruption is what you pay for actually receiving your entitlement. And in that sense, corruption is something for which you pay twice. You pay for access and you pay for the right to that access. Corruption is an informational model of an economy. In fact, it is the first of the great knowledge economies. The tout, the cop, the MLA, i.e. the politician—these are the basic controllers of the economy. Corruption actually begins with the very act of society. A migrant coming into the city has to pay even to enter the city. Two, he has to pay even to sleep in the city, if you notice that even roads are rented out by landsharks. So the beauty of corruption is that it converts any act of being into something which is rentable, something which is chargeable by a tout and a policeman.

If you understand this, then you have to understand that corruption is structural to the very nature of modernisation. Corruption is very central to the very idea of development. It is not a pathology. It is built into the developmental model, which is why one has to be careful of condemning it as pathology, which I think comes with the danger of becoming a “World Bank kind of change.”

### **What are the root causes of corruption? How does Indian corruption differ from that in other parts of the world?**

Let's first take the question of Indian corruption. Corruption is an idiom; it is a form of knowledge. In fact, if you look at it, the language of corruption is one of the most interesting things anthropologically. Narendra Pani has an example. He says in Karnataka, if you have to file any kind of a form, you have to put a silver coin on it. Otherwise it would fly away. Look at the kind of language used. ‘*Kuch service kar sakte hain. Aapko oblige kar sakte hain. Aapke paas kuch contact hain*’. To a certain extent, the very distortion of language shows that

corruption is a different idiom in India. It is the idiom of a parochial society. It is the idiom of kinship. It is the idiom of family and extended family. Corruption in India works in terms of family idioms; works in terms of what is called the *newjajmani* system. Corruption, in fact, is an extension of the *jajmani* system. That is the nature of the Indian idiom. India has gone through several phases. First, it began with an idea that the State is an inverted commons. So the State, rather than be a public entitlement became an inverted common, where people had to pay to access the State.

The changes here began in four ways. First, with the criminalisation of politics. Earlier, there was a separation between the goonda and the politician. The first thing that happened is that the goonda became the politician. Or the politician became the goonda.

Second, I think is the criminalisation of the State itself. And it began with the emergency. And a man who contributed greatly to corruption was Sanjay Gandhi, because he made the State a privatised access. To a certain extent, that is what the Emergency did. In fact, an interesting thing that Emergency did was that it destroyed petty crime so that the State could take over crime completely. Sanjay Gandhi, in fact, became one of the first of the great defence *dalals* (middlemen).

The third part is, I think, that corruption changes with liberalisation. The old license-raj does not work. Corrupt people themselves realised that the old license-raj and quota-raj offer very limited ways of stealing. Liberalisation of corruption, in fact, organises the liberalisation of the economy. If these are the first three stages, there are two more we must add.

With liberalisation, two things become important. Terror becomes a commodity. And terror has to be seen as part of the corruption economy. Remember, to finance terror, you need drugs. To finance terror, you need various forms of trafficking. And terror, in fact, is a violation of rights in a way which has to be seen as part of the corruption economy.

And the fifth thing, which India is celebrating in a big way is the way State and corporates are getting integrated. These are the five processes within which you have to see corruption.

I'd be very careful of trying to essentialise corruption in India by saying that we're genetically corrupt. I think it is absolute nonsense. That is why everytime we are accused of being corrupt, we think about the Indian character. Every nation has some kind of civilisation. But you have to be clear about one thing. Corruption is both universal and particular. If there is one thing that is both global and local, it is corruption. You have to understand both languages in order to function.

### **How is corruption in India different from corruption elsewhere?**

One thing we have to be clear. As we globalise, the corruption is not that different. What we have to see is that in a developing country like India, where 70 percent of the economy is in the informal sector, the question of the informal economy becomes far more important. With many of the new modernised states, the level of the informal economy is very low. India exists in the informal economy. Most of the suggestions for reform, the idea of the lokayukta or ombudsman, will work on the formal economy. And reforming the informal economy requires a different theory of change. And that is what is missing in many of the new things.

### **Do you see any difference in corruption, the kind and the magnitude, since the writing of your book *Foul Play* in 1997?**

With *Foul Play*, I looked at corruption up to the criminalisation of politics and the criminalisation of the State. I looked at it upto the advent of terror. I basically looked at the

Bombay Blasts, and showed how the Bombay Blasts were achieved by the Customs Department itself. In fact, we showed that all the RDX was driven into Bombay in an Assistant Commissioner's jeep. You got to remember that smuggling which is seen as a deviant way of life actually exists in reciprocity with the Customs service. No smuggling; No customs service. And vice-versa.

Two new things happened after that. Liberalisation became very big. Terror and security, just like customs and smuggling have created their own reciprocity. And to a certain extent, the reciprocity between terror and security creates its own kind of smuggling. It creates what I call the paramilitarisation of society. Defence deals are no longer external things for the army. You start brutalising your own people as a matter of corruption.

I think one more step happened. The license raj exploded. Today you are acting on a global scale, where one act of licensing. . . See Jagjivan Ram had a brilliant slogan. He said "Seven harrier jets is equal to an election." Today, the scale is much more. In fact, the cost of one plane would actually be enough to finance an Indian election. There is a tremendous difference in scale, and to a certain extent, there has been a globalisation of corruption.

That means two things have been added to it. A lot of what we would earlier talk about as taboo in terms of sexuality and so on—take human trafficking, for instance, which is stunning today or take the militarisation of modern India and of South Asia, in general—it is of an order which actually also creates corruption. Today, from Pakistan to Sri Lanka, there is one major conduit running—for arms, for drugs, for human beings. All three are seen as commodities. The LTTE was absolutely corrupt. It had its offices in Paris. It is the same with all major terrorist agencies. They eventually become tax collection agencies. Look at the Northeast. It is the transformation of terror into tax collection.

There is one more change. That is the consolidation of the traditional bureaucracy and the corporation. We have created today what I call a political, bureaucratic, military, industrial complex of corporations and the State, which is becoming frightening. It is gargantuan. And it is almost going to be impossible to regulate. That is the change we have to fight. It is the corporatisation of the State. 2G, 3G is only the beginning of the State as a continuous scamster.

**Dalit intellectuals like Anand Teltumbde say that "Corruption, basically, is the byproduct of power asymmetry in society and, in that sense, Indian society becomes an ideal prototype for it because of its unique institution of caste. It is therefore that India figures among the most corrupt countries." What is your reaction to this statement?**

First, let me say that I disagree completely with this statement. Let's face it. Countries in Africa, Indonesia are corrupt to a point that India has not achieved. If there is a corruption index of development, we're still far behind in many ways. We'll be among the lower half of the first ten. The scale of corruption in these countries is of a different order. And the link between violence and corruption in these countries is of an order that we have not achieved. We create violence through development. And they create violence through war. The linkage between war and corruption is very different from the linkage between corruption and development. Both destroy but in different ways. War is more blatant but the destruction of development and corrupt development can be more insidious, corroding the very institutions of society.

Second, caste as an entity is double-faced. Caste can give you a model of corruption. But to vilify caste in this way won't do. While *jajmani* is a model of corruption, varieties of corruption go far beyond caste. You can't look at a modern corporation; you can't look at a modern army; you can't look at the modern State purely in terms of the old caste model. To do so would be to misunderstand the modernisation. I'm surprised that someone like a *Dalit* is making this

statement. Because *Dalits* are not just the greatest authorities on caste; they have to be the greatest authorities on modernisation.

The statement is incomplete; by being incomplete, it is being inaccurate; by being inaccurate, it's being outdated; and by being outdated, I think it is false. We have to take this head-on, because this is the kind of essentialisation we don't need while analysing corruption.

**What is your reaction to the campaign against corruption, that had its epicentre in Ramlila Maidan?**

Let's face it. This epicentre called Ramlila Maidan was a new historical event. Groups like the MKSS have been battling corruption much earlier. We have to see corruption in a historical perspective. Starting with the JP Movement, to the MKSS, to groups like Aruna Roy who have been rooted in this issue to the Hazare Movement, there has been a continuous battle within the civil society against corruption.

The epicentre we are talking about today is the current epicentre. It was not the epicentre of the corruption battle even six months ago. So we are talking about haute history, where the newspaper defines the geography of an event. In that sense, Ramlila is the epicentre. Otherwise, I would be a bit reluctant to give centrality to the Anna Hazare movement historically.

**Why do you think that people have come out on the streets for a common cause like this?**

There are two kinds of protest movements—horizontal and vertical. Vertical movements tend to work in terms of social strata, like caste and class. To a certain extent, battles around caste and class tend to be vertical. They represent a slice of reality. Horizontal movements tend to emphasise citizenship. They are usually middle class, but tend to cut across class categories, and cut across certain caste categories.

The so-called Ramlila Movement, if there is an idea, it is in the act of citizenship. What they're trying to say is that every Indian has the right to access certain entitlements. And as an Indian, corruption in a way delimits citizenship, and narrows the idea of the Indian imagination. In that sense, it is a powerful idea.

The second thing it has done. . . This is the movement that has said that the State is too big. It needs to be cut down, but remember, that one kind of imagination, and one kind of seeing is also a way of non-seeing. One kind of sight also assumes a certain kind of blindness. You have to understand that this movement that is emphasising corruption does not absorb wider issues—of human rights and justice; of development; of the question of the informal economy; or even the structural changes that globalisation has induced.

By purely focusing on the Lokpal Bill, it has created a one-point obsession. It has captured the imagination. Let's distinguish between the power of the protest and the disadvantages of the bill. The protest is powerful. It is middle class. An activist I know put it brilliantly. He said “The demographic dividend has created the democratic dividend. A new generation of professionals is ready to apply its skills to add competence to democracy. The democratic dividend has to be cashed carefully, like any kind of share. In this you have to be careful, because the Hazare Bill by itself is incomplete, partial and problematic. It needs a wider plurality.

Here I want to differentiate between the ethics of Anna Hazare and the politics of Anna Hazare. As far as the ethics of a Gandhian are concerned, I have tremendous respect for him. But in terms of the competence of a bill, I think it is inadequate. And I think it is ethically essential to tell Hazare that his bill is incomplete.

**Corruption has always been there, why had they not taken to the streets earlier? Was there a tipping point?**

There is a tipping point. It is actually the folklore of the information revolution. Today, everybody emphasises speed. Speed in delivery, speed in desire, speed in greed. Why not speed in bureaucracy? So really what we're seeing is a battle between the old information system, embodied in the police system, the Congress party and the IAS bureaucracy. And the new information system, which emphasises speed and quality of delivery. I'll tell you what's the difference. The difference was consumerism. For a new generation, consumerism talked of the emphasis of quality, deliver, dignity and the right of recall. What I find is that they have taken these assumptions of consumerism, and transferred that to citizenship. And between rights and consumerism, a very new powerful kind of imagination has been brought in. And that's the stunning beauty of it, that the man who looks like an ascetic, a gandhian has actually inspired a middle-class consumer group to fight against corruption. There are ironies.

**What do they see in Anna and his Bill? What does it symbolise to all the protesting people?**

Everything needed. Let's be clear. What they see in Anna is one thing; what they see in the bill is another. For many people who trust Anna, the bill itself is an act of trust. Many of them may not have read it. We have to differentiate the two. I think they see in Anna, a Gandhian. They see in Anna, a packet of history. They see in Anna the kind of nostalgia they never knew in the national movement. They see in Anna a kind of integrity, and when the Government treated him badly, every man became an Anna because to a certain extent, it threatened the integrity and the rights of every Indian. To see an old man treated that way, reflected a Governmental cruelty which every one objected to. What they objected to was a lack of decency, a lack of integrity and a lack of basic civility. The arrest of Anna threatened the civility of the nation. And the middle class came out. "You don't do this. You have already done this to all of us. And now you're doing this, you have reached the tipping point."

The arrest of Anna, I think, was the tipping point.

There is tremendous trust in Anna. I think it is that trust that is carried into the bill, but one has to be careful. There, I think that one has to untangle the bill, open it up, massage it, allow for other groups that have been fighting on this to look at corruption in different ways. Truths can be one, but the expressions of truths can be plural. In the same way, the battle against corruption can be one, but the ways to fight corruption plural. And there, Anna has to be criticised. My ethics as a social scientist demands that I challenge Anna on this. But my ethics as a citizen demands that I back Anna. Now the two ethics have to debate it out.

**There is a fear among certain sections of minorities and Dalits that it sets a dangerous precedent, and that it is anti-democratic. Please unravel the various strands, the threats and opportunities, that the last few months have thrown up.**

Here's where plurality becomes important. When you see Anna Hazare, along with him you see Sri Sri Ravishankar, you see Ramdev. In fact, in many of the demonstrations, you see Bajrang Dal, RSS. They are all there. Let's be clear. They are visually there, they are organisationally there. Some of the money for these movements may be coming from there in terms of support. That is why, I think, the plurality is important. If Anna Hazare doesn't combine with other groups fighting for Right to Information, doesn't combine with other groups fighting corruption on the ground, it will look narrow and parochial. And as long as it looks narrow and parochial, it might have to rely on the support of these groups. I'm not saying that they are not important. I think Ramdev is important, because to a certain extent he represents a certain alternative to modernity. I think to a certain extent, Sri Sri Shankar is important; Jaggi Vasudev is important, because spirituality is going to anchor the political critique of corruption. Spirituality often

substitutes for ideology. It provides the meaning frame for many successful middle class people, re-echoing the values they think are fundamental.

In this sense, one has to be careful. How these groups balance and negotiate is going to be important. Any middle-class imagination has to make allowances for the fact that it is blind to the poor, blind to the marginal, blind to those who may not even have an active citizenship—nomadic groups, pastoral groups and so on. I don't think the Anna imagination has gone that far. If you look at it, it's more worried about birth certificates, adulteration... that's the limit of the imagination. It is worried about the way the cop insults it, or the bureaucrat cheats it. But if you want to go for a wider theory of citizenship, then the Anna Hazare movement has to link up to these other political movements. If it does not, it will become a form of political predictability, something more mechanical.

### **What are the various strands, threats and opportunities that the last three months have thrown up?**

Look, protest was a dirty word. Earlier, if you mention the word “gherao” or “strike,” the middle class would frown on it. Strike and gherao meant delay; meant the bundling of traffic in a particular place. Today, the very group that would earlier frown on a trade union strike or a gherao are today ready to protest. They realise that if we don't protest, the powers don't listen. What Anna did was provide a megaphone to a state that needed a hearing aid. The message was loud and clear: Corruption is something that we're not going to accept. Protest against corruption becomes a necessary and permissible feedback for the democratic system.

He galvanised the people by providing a political site at Ramlila and a megaphone that amplified their voices. In that sense, I think it is a tremendous opportunity. The emphasis is still on, what I call, the horizontality of citizenship. To this, you have to add a critique of development, a critique of the State. Otherwise, there is a problem of irony. The very method that began by saying that I'm fighting corruption might eventually add to totalitarianism. There is always a danger of intolerance; there is always a danger of gigantism. There is always the danger that you make Lokpal the fourth estate after the executive, the legislature and the judiciary. You don't create a giant bureaucracy to fight corruption. There is an irony in it which Anna has not seen. He sees the morality of it. But he also has to see if he is educationally literate in terms of the textuality of the bill, organisationally literate in terms of the hierarchies that the bill is endangering. He's creating one more giant bureaucracy. The question then is “Who are going to police the people who are fighting corruption?” They are as liable to corruption. Where is the question of cybernetic feedbacks? These are questions the Hazare movement hasn't answered. Maybe it's too quick because in a way they are fighting for survival. If they do not answer it, then over time you will see the very kind of behaviour from them that you saw from the police and the politician—intolerance, delay, prevarication and inability to negotiate. Unfortunately, democracy is made up of these very prosaic things—skills about negotiation; literacy about plurality and an attempt to understand that there is no one solution to a problem. If you believe in one solution to a problem, you are on your way to a totalitarian system.

### **The current campaign has been compared to the Freedom Struggle, and the Sampoorna Kranti movement triggered by JP. What are the commonalities and differences between these struggles?**

I think one has to be a bit careful. Nostalgia is nice, it's sentimental, it can encourage movements, but you have to see how history plays in these three movements. During the Swadeshi movement, many people would in fact refuse food and their daughters to anyone who was corrupt. It was the “roti-beti” movement. In the national movement, there was a great appeal to character building and honesty. Someone like Vishweshvaraya, who was one of the great planners of modern India, he used to carry two pens – one for office, one for home. In fact, he

used to even carry two torches. The division between public and private, between family and State was worked out.

That same kind of thing continued in JP Movement because the JP Movement was rooted in nationalism. It was rooted in socialism. It was rooted in ideology. It was also a party movement. It involved people in the party in a certain way. It had certain kind of ideological moorings. You were fighting corruption and injustice. The new movement is not fighting for justice. It is fighting for speed; it is fighting for efficiency; it is fighting for dignity; it is fighting for delivery.

Two, it is trying to create history. But it is not yet historical. Its idea of history is nostalgia. You know our current idea of nationalism comes from NCERT textbooks, *Rang De Basanti* and what parents tell you. This generation has not lived through the history of nationalism. However, I think it misses the power, the potency and the poetry of nationalism. To a certain extent, this is an attempt to recreate it. It is that very nostalgia that has driven people to create their own version of history and their own sense of a dream of what a nation should be. In that sense, powerful.

In any act of imagination, you have to look at countertrends and ironies. I think those are becoming more and more obvious. A search for plurality has to be part of this movement. It is not just a question of representing a Dalit, it has to represent a wider developmental imagination, a wider notion of human rights, and then look at how to fight corruption. It will take time. But I think as an experiment, it is superb. As a movement, it is poetry. But in terms of prosaic details in terms of how an organisation or a system of reform has to be established, I think it's incomplete. And in its incompleteness lies the challenge.

**Rahul Gandhi made a statement in parliament that Lokpal should be institutionalised and Constitutionalised like the Election Commission. What are your thoughts on that?**

I think it is a good idea. To a certain extent, that will give it a kind of respectability. What he is trying to say is that by constitutionalising it, we take the idea seriously. But to do that, you have to go to the constitution in a different way. You have to look at the relations between the State and the Centre. You have to look at the question of what kind of bureaucracy you'd need. You have to look at what are the implications of law. I think it requires a certain amount of homework. The problem with a lot of good ideas is that you only see how good they are when you try to operationalise them. And this is the point Arun Jaitley was trying to make. "Is it only a certain classification in law, or is it an attempt to take something more seriously?" Remember, till Seshan came, it was not as if the Election Commission was taken seriously. It is the way in which you bring the spirit of the Constitution in an Act. When you look at Constitutionality, I'm all for it. But sometimes, you have to face the irony that in setting up some of these bureaucracies, you may as well constitutionalise corruption. That irony will always haunt us