

Corruption reflects a crisis of ethics, values

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August 25, 2022

Opinion

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Battling the corruption menace | Photo Credit: Kritchanut

Corruption in the police, politics and the property sector is all-pervasive, despite checks and balances such as digitisation

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's clarion call against corruption during his recent Independence Day speech revealed his anguish and exasperation as also his passionate campaign for more transparency and honesty in public life.

More than in previous years his tone seemed to be one of anger from a man in a hurry. He obliquely referred to those who had enriched themselves at the cost of the public and the need for purging them from our midst.

But why is it that, even after 75 years of Independence we continue to be branded internationally as a corrupt nation.

This is despite having a scrupulously honest and hugely charismatic leader at the top who has staked his all on rapid economic development without compromising values.

Do we continue to be in a morass because our mechanics to root out corruption are flawed? Or has the collective character of the nation gone beyond repair? It's incredibly hard to answer this question.

The Prime Minister's theme at the Red Fort rightly was that handling corruption was a joint endeavour between the government and the public. Without a union of minds and endeavour little can be achieved to enhance our moral credibility. A bribe taker cannot flourish without a bribe giver. It is as simple as that.

There are many other countries worse off than us in their ability to provide clean governance. The comparison is however odious because very few of the former have achieved the excellence that we have in areas of education, public health, technology and communication.

An annual stocktaking is not only useful but is imperative if we are to move forward to take our rightful place in the comity of developed nations.

What the common man is most agitated about is the dishonesty of government officials, both in the higher echelons and at the bottom. This evil prevails both in State administration and in a few bureaucratic segments at the Centre.

Digitisation has no doubt streamlined the issue of critical documents such as birth/death certificates and driving licences. Undoubtedly public servants' discretion in these areas has been whittled down and this is a positive move.

Real estate bog

Corruption however remains unbearable in areas such as registration of documents relating to buying and selling property and sanction of planning permissions to put up new buildings. Rates of illegal under-the-table payments have been fixed for different stages of a project however small or big they may be. This accounts for the high real estate prices.

Developers without exception have succumbed to this usurious demand for bribes and have no option but to pay up. If by chance any of them do not yield to the demand for bribes they are harassed through inordinate delays in sanctioning plans. The widely held belief is that the illegal money so generated goes up the ladder. The lower echelons cite this in defence of their demand from the hapless applicant. How does one get around this vicious circle?

This is where political corruption plays a huge role. The reference to the demand for a 'plum portfolio' during formation of a government is nauseating and has many dismaying connotations.

The next area of concern to the common man is corruption in law enforcement. Police departments all over the country are notorious for their dishonesty. There is hardly any among the 10,000 or more police stations in the country which can claim they are free from the malady. Services to which the common man is entitled as a matter of right are mostly sold. This is painful but true.

Many cities across the world have had police scandals in the past. That is however poor consolation for episodes like what we saw recently in Mumbai, a city that rightly prided itself until a few years ago for a professional police force. This particular sordid drama presented ugly exchanges between a Minister and the top police brass. It highlighted how an important arm of the administration could be misused and converted into a conduit for transmitting illegal money.

Some sections of the higher police bureaucracy in most States belonging to the prestigious IPS will have to bear the blame for this.

Many of them are extremely bright backed by a distinguished academic career. Many of them have fallen prey to a vulgarly high style of living and have deliberately compromised traditional values. Action has been initiated against a few of them. There is however cynicism whether that will act as a sufficient deterrent.

Deterrent laws and executive action alone cannot bring down levels of dishonesty. The analogy is with conventional crime. Consensus among criminologists is that stiffer sentences are not accompanied by a dip in crime.

There is something more to breaking the perceived causal chain. This is where education in ethics steps in. Unless our future generations are indoctrinated in favour of honesty in their careers there is precious little to hope for them.

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Published on August 25, 2022

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