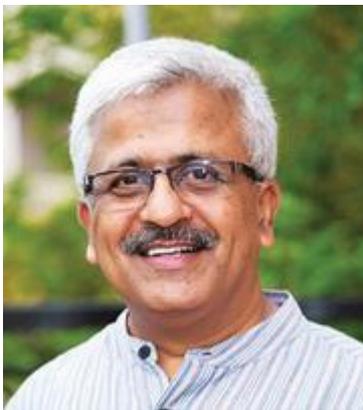




Ration shops are part of the corruption nexus

Cutting out corruption



WE live in a world where we have built the cost of corruption into our transactions. Whether it is getting a building or driving licence, registering a new vehicle, the spectrum allocation for the telecom company or permission to drill for oil or natural gas — everything comes at a price!

Corruption has become such an integral part of our lives that we do not see the negative consequences of such actions. Whether it is the fire in a public building that occurred because

R BALASUBRAMANIAM the fire department overlooked the lacunae while granting the clearances, or buildings collapsing and killing hundreds only because the construction norms were allowed to be violated at a price, we have come to terms with the outcomes of a corrupt system.

In every sector that we can think of, corruption usually begins with the user looking for a short-cut in order to maximize his profits in the short run. Very rarely does it occur to us that we are the final losers in this game of one-upmanship. From the corrupt politician whom we elect after being bribed to do so, to the traffic violations that we want condoned by the local

policeman for a petty sum — each one of these instances results in an unseen consequence for us. Unfortunately, most of us seem to be satisfied with the visible benefits of the money that we make or the time that we save, and we fail to see the larger decay that society is getting into.

While participating in a Self-Help Group (SHG) meeting nearly two decades ago, some women informed me that they were now getting 14 kg rice free through the Public Distribution System (PDS). This was at a time when these tribal women were entitled to 28 kg of rice every month at the subsidised price of Rs 3. One of the women mentioned to me that she even had a bill that was given to her. I was surprised to see that the bill was for 28 kg of rice and an amount of `84 had been shown as paid.

Confused, I spoke to the district authorities only to learn there were no changes made to the rules relating to the PDS. Digging deeper, I learnt that the food inspector was paying Rs 84 to the PDS store owner who gave the bill to the buyer. The food inspector would directly sell 14 kg of rice to the local hotelier at Rs 20 per kg and give the remaining 14 kg free to the tribal families. Everybody benefited from this simple formula. The tribals got 14 kg of rice free, the government got the Rs 84 due to it, the hotelier got to buy rice at Rs 20 per kg while the prevailing market price was Rs 30, and the food inspector netted Rs 196 per family per month.

Since no one felt cheated, there was neither a sense of participating in a corrupt system nor feeling like a victim. It was a simple way of co-opting the common man into the complex world of corruption and maladministration. It was a win-win situation for all and while everyone seemingly benefited from this corruption, little did anyone realize that in the long run society stood to lose.

Corruption, defined as ‘the abuse of public power for private gain’, has existed for long. It encompasses unilateral abuses by government officials such as embezzlement and nepotism, as well as abuses linking public and private actors such as bribery, extortion, influence peddling and fraud. Evidence confirms that corruption hurts the poor disproportionately and hinders efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by reducing access to social services and diverting resources away from investments in infrastructure, institutions, and social services.

In the political realm, corruption undermines democracy and good governance by subverting formal processes. Corruption in elections and in legislative bodies reduces accountability and representation in policy-making. Corruption in the judiciary suspends the rule of law, and corruption in public administration results in the unequal provision of services. More generally, corruption erodes the institutional capacity of government as procedures are

disregarded, resources are siphoned off, and officials are hired or promoted without regard to performance.

Being engaged for more than two decades in fighting this scourge of corruption has left me with the conviction that no amount of legislation or its enforcement can bring about a ‘corruption-free’ society. I am of the opinion that we should not be fighting ‘against’ something but instead spend our energies fighting ‘for’ something. Our energies will be better spent if we fought for good governance and transparency instead of fighting against corruption. A positive construct is not just a semantic, but a strong expression of our own beliefs and value systems.

A simple way to begin is to TAP into our own inner selves in beginning this battle for a better and cleaner society. We need to bring TAP into every action in our daily lives — whether it is personal, familial, professional or societal. Only when we bring in T-Transparency, A-Accountability and P-Participation into our lives, can we make this extraordinary transformation. We need to understand that corruption is not limited to our politicians and bureaucrats alone. Most sections of society have become corrupt and the only way to fight it would be for every section of society to unitedly pledge to be transparent, accountable and participate in the change that all of us wish to see. Whether it is the common citizen, the trader, the petty official, the career bureaucrat, the corporate CEO or the politician — people of all hues, walks of life and professions need to join hands and become transparent in all their dealings, be accountable to themselves and to society at large and, finally, participate and take responsibility as enlightened citizens in every action that impacts our lives.

This is not something that is utopian and impractical — each one of us can do it and we need to do it now. This needs no legislation but the simple will to be a part of the change that can transform us individually and as a nation. All that remains is our own inner battle. Can we as the average Indian stand tall and decide to stay honest, follow the laws of the land and refuse to become corrupt and remain incorruptible in all that we do? Laws and anti-corruption institutions can only provide enabling environments when things go wrong and one seeks redressal. It is the courage to stand against the tide, and lead a value-based life irrespective of the consequences that can make a difference. We need to internalize that in today’s market-driven world, it is indeed expensive to stay honest. But then the fulfilment of being the change can never be matched by the small conveniences that a dishonest existence brings.

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