

Corruption in Rural India

By

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This article tries to spotlight the modes of corruption and agents of corruption in India's villages. It also tries to identify the causes of corruption. Through this pioneering academic attempt, an invitation is extended to research workers throughout India to come forward with statistical data either supporting or refuting the formulations in the present study.

The term 'Corruption' defies easy definition. For our purpose, corruption is an act of extorting additional benefits in cash or kind, while performing one's duties assigned within rules and regulations of the employing agency. The Central Bureau of Investigation tries to discover corruption by finding out the discrepancy between the expenditure incurred by specified individual and his identifiable, known sources of income. In any academic study relating to corruption, the availability of data is an uphill task, because such a research study cannot obviously be backed by the force of authority of the State. Besides, it is impossible to get the willing cooperation of those who are corrupt.

The study of corruption in India's villages assumes added importance, because of two reasons. Firstly, a vast majority of India's population lives in villages. Out of every ten Indians, seven live in villages. Secondly, the corruption of the big and the urban people is quite often adequately focussed by the national press. However, the corruption affecting the vast majority of rural masses does not get proper attention; perhaps, because it is not 'sensational', and also it requires continuous stay and study in rural areas, which is quite an exacting effort.

Coming to instruments of corruption, let us take some of these, one by one.

The most important carrier of corruption in India's villages is the village *Patwari* or Patel. He maintains land records. If there is a dispute between two land-owners about the

line of demarcation, the *Khasra Numbers* (plot numbers) have to be given by the village patwari. Who is the 'actual cultivator' and who is the 'owner' of a particular piece of land can be determined by a *Patwari* alone, through his land records. The assesment of land revenue and irrigation charges is also determined by the entries of the village *Patwari*. His records have also to be consulted at the time of sale or transfer of land from one person to another.

Now, the maintenance of accurate land records is the normal duty of the village *Patwari*, for which he is paid by the State. But normally he is paid additional remuneration twice a year, at the time of *Kharif* (Summer) and *Rabi* (Winter) crops by the village land-owners, in kind. Land reforms in rural India have failed, primarily due to the corruption of the village *Patwari*, who is virtually on the pay-roll of the village land-owning classes. The 1982 model of the 20 point economic programme talks of completing accurate land records for impementation of land reforms and distribution of surplus land. Given the institution of corrupt village *Patwari* in India, it would be a great wonder, if this point could be implemented within a spcified period of time.

At the Tahsil level, the chief carrier of corruption of the revenue department is the Tehsildar, who is supposed to control the *Patwaris*. He is the authorised head to legalise land transfers, due to inheritance or sale and purchase. Openly and unashmedly, he demands cash from the parties. Besides, he gets regular 'shares' of the corruption by the *Patwaris* and their immediate heads 'Kanungos'.

Another department, that affects the lives of the average villager through its rampant corruption is the irrigation department. The new 20-point economic programme aims at increasing the irrigation potential in rural India. The village people, may or may not be sufficiently benefited by this planned increase in irrigation, but the corrupt irrigation department officials are going to be the surest gainers. In areas where canals are a source of irrigation, the chief instrument of corruption at the village level is the *Nehri Patwari* or the irrigation assistant. Land revenue on irrigated land is higher. Some-times irrigation rates are different for different crops. If the *Nehri Patwari* declares 'Kharaba' i.e. wasted crops, no irrigation charges are levied. He extracts specified amounts of grains every six months from the farmers and makes entries in his records, which leads to loss of revenue to the State. He has the power to punish honest *Kisans*, who are unwilling to bribe him, by levying extra economic burden on them through wrong entries of crops under irrigation. In areas where State-owned tubewells are the means of irrigation, the tube-well operator is the most powerful, corrupt person. He extorts regular share of crops from the farmers, besides a specified amount, over and above the rate charged by State, per acre of irrigated land.

The wide-spread corruption in the construction of canals needs no comment. Conventionally fixed shares of the total bill to be paid to the contractor for construction to be shared by different officials are a well-known phenomenon. Corruption has been smoothly institutionalised, so that it should be taken for granted as a part of the normal

routine, so that nobody's conscience may prick. The World Bank has sanctioned vast sums of money for making the embankments of canals pucca with bricks and cement. A little vigilance, according to those who know, may reduce, the cost of the canals easily between 7 to 10 percent which would be no mean saving.

Another awe-inspiring, powerful medium of corruption affecting the common man in the village is the Thanedar (the Station House Officer) of the police post nearby. If there are mutual quarrels in any village, this instrument of authority intervenes to restore peace. Both the warring sides, have to part with money, whether they compromise or not. If any simple, ordinary villager goes to the nearby police station for lodging First Information Report (F.I.R.) it would be a miracle if he could get his grievances redressed without paying some money to the Thanedar. The custodian of law and order functions more in favour of the powerful, land-owing group in the village, even if the poor landless labourers might have been harrassed. In the name of finding out persons engaged in brewing desi liquor, raids are organised on the houses of the poor people in the village without any legal sanctions or proper search warrants. Such documents are prepared and procured only, if and when some people have the guts to raise their fingers against injustice.

The most powerful and effective tool of corruption in rural India is the village Nambardar, the traditional village head-man. In villages where elections to Panchayats have been introduced, he has been substituted by village Sarpanch, the elected head of the village Panchayat. All the functionaries of various departments from the nearby Tehsil headquarters come to his house first. He is invariably their host. His contacts and links with bureaucracy, which is invariably corrupt, help him in sharing the spoils of corruption. He is the instrument through whom deals are struck with Patwari, the Tehsildar, the Thanedar, the tubewell operator and the Co-operative Society and Block Development Inspector. The channel between the village folk and the corrupt officials of bureacuracy also gets lubricated in this process.

Some scholars tend to justify corruption also. They term the extra money paid in corruption as 'the additional cost of efficiency.' According to their argument, India's wage and salary structure is at a very low level. If in the process of construction they charge additional amount through corrupt practices and complete the projects in time, corruption may have to be put up with. According to them, sentimentalism and moral peaching would not get the ball rolling.

Causes and Cure

It would be interesting to find out various causes of corruption. Unless you know the causes of a disease, you cannot offer proper prescription for curing it. During a period

of swiftly rising price in any economy, the real incomes of the fixed income group of government servants are eroded. The incomes of the propertied classes increase. There is thus a temptation for workers operating the bureaucratic machine to add a bit to their monthly salaries through corrupt practices, from the landowning sections of the society. Inflation in the economy is thus one of the possible promoters of corruption in our villages.

The injection of politics in rural communities has also contributed to the growth of corruption. Almost every village now has one or two 'political workers' who have their links with higher echelons of the ruling party. They extort money from the farmers to get their work done. For such activities, they charge their price, either in cash or in kind.

Scarcity of commodities of daily use and agricultural inputs is another major cause of corruption in rural India. Right since the inception of the First Five Year Plan in 1951 upto the present, the planning process has ended up with the emergence of a 'scarcity economy' in India. In spite of the best efforts of the planners to bring about balances in supplies and demands in Indian economy, the fact remains that even at the beginning of the year 1983, there are scarcities of supplies of sugar, kerosene oil, diesel, vanaspati oil etc. in Indian villages. The bureaucrats try to distribute these commodities through various channels. Influential members of the co-operatives, the Block Development office workers all connive with each other. The commodities in short supply reach, not the genuinely needy persons, but those who make extra money out of it. The diesel driven tubewells and tractors—symptoms of modern technology, are run not at the official controlled prices, but at black market prices.

Exercise of discretion also leads to corruption. Where rules and regulations are vague for the exercise of authority, there invariably arises scope for corruption. Whenever a bureaucrat has the discretion to sign a particular registration deed of land, he has the scope of making money. Issuing of taccavi loans, permits for diesel, kerosene, cement, sugar, vegetable oils and other commodities, if these are left within the discretionary powers of the issuing authority, it would be extremely difficult to avoid corruption. Streamlining the administrative rules and regulations seems to be the necessary remedial measure.

Another cause of corruption in an under-developed, poor country like India is the 'demonstration effect' of the upper classes on the living pattern of the relatively poorer sections. The fixed income group wants to ape the high income group. The result is that they try to supplement their incomes through corrupt means. Gandhiji's message of simple living and high thinking seems to have been forgotten in his own land.

Perhaps the most important cause of corruption in rural India is the institution of private property in land. Whenever the ownership right to his piece of land is in danger, the farmer is prepared to pay any amount to Patwari, the Tehsildar or any other official. The

extremists in India would tend to suggest the abolition of private property rights in land to root out corruption. But would such a remedy be acceptable to millions of small peasants in India? Moreover, will it be advisable to make an already not-so-honest bureaucracy most powerful by abolishing property rights in toto? It looks we have to get ourselves reconciled to a mixed package of a bit of corruption alongwith freedom to cultivate one's own piece of land.