

### Corruption in India: Problems, solutions and the future

The recent backlash against political and governmental corruption in India in the form of Anna Hazare's movement and the recent cannonades of Arvind Kejriwal directed at India's political elite appear, on the surface at least, to have sent some shockwaves through the institutions of power. It has convinced some members of the Indian public that it marks a change; a gleam of hope in a society previously resigned to acceptance of the status quo. However, when one takes into account the extent, complexity and history of the problem of corruption in India, one cannot help but think this is a little naive.

Corruption within the Indian institutions of power is by no means a phenomenon of the last few decades. It has existed in one form or another since the days of the British Raj and even before then. However, it was only with the advent of independence that major 'anti-corruption' drives were initiated.<sup>1</sup> Yet, as William Gould of Leeds University has pointed out, the emergence of 'anti-corruption' was subsequently corrupted in itself; it began to be used by politicians and officials for their own agendas.<sup>2</sup> Although legislation was implemented to help repress this, corruption continued to manifest itself in the state, particularly so under the years of 'License Raj', and has continued unabated into the previous two decades.

What has evolved from this is a popular idea of a growing crisis of corruption, which, because of the lack of options available to the public, has led to widespread popular resignation. Yet as the apparent extent of political and official corruption has increased in the last two decades, so has discontent with it; it is this discontent that has successfully been articulated in the recent anti-corruption movements referred to above. However, what is worrying is the intransigence of those in positions of power in the face of such public outrage. The numerous corruption scandals that have rocked India in the near past, have usually been met with the same set of inadequate responses: silence, denial, dismissal or counter-accusation. For example, when asked about the recent scathing accusations levelled at him by Kejriwal, India's former Law Minister Salman Kurshid said he would 'not take questions from people on the street'<sup>3</sup>; the very people who are meant to have placed him in power and whom he is meant to serve.

This is not restricted to politicians either. A similar culture of denial and silence can be found throughout the Government service. The Right to Information (RTI) Act was passed in 2005, and as a result local Public Information Officers (PIO) assigned to each government department are meant to enforce its stipulations and provide information to the public about department spending, official salaries and so forth.<sup>4</sup> I interviewed a number of such officers and largely got the same vague answers, when I asked for specific information and backed myself up with the provisions of the RTI Act. For example, I asked the PIO for the department of Food Supply of Kanpur to show me the budgetary information for the department and the current spending figures. Instead of complying, the official in question proceeded to tell me 'the department does not have a budget'. When I asked

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<sup>1</sup> William Gould, 'A Brief History of Corruption In India', *The India Site*, (2011) <<http://www.theindiasite.com/a-brief-history-of-corruption-in-india/>>

<sup>2</sup> See William Gould's book *Bureaucracy, Community and Influence: Society and the State in India, 1930-1960s* (London: Routledge, 2011), for more information on this issue.

<sup>3</sup> Chandrabhas Choudhury, 'Anti-Corruption Crusader Rattles India's Powerful', *Bloomberg*, (2012), <<http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2012-10-23/anti-corruption-crusader-rattles-india-s-powerful.html>>

<sup>4</sup> As set out in Section 4 (i) RTI Act 2005: <http://rti.gov.in/rti-act.pdf>

if he meant in essence a 'blank cheque' he replied 'yes', which, of course, is simply not true. This demonstrates the second problem in attempting to prevent Indian governmental corruption by trying to work through the system. Even if anti-corruption laws are passed (like RTI) they cannot be enforced because of the culture of corruption that exists. This begs the question of what can be done to make a start to putting an end to it.

The issue has stimulated widely varying views as to what is the best solution. Many see the problem as a result of the way that Indian society works, or the growth of greed with the advent of consumerism on a grander scale. In the case of India, it has been argued that the 'moral' corruption of Indian society preceded, and led to, the corruption of the political and government system.<sup>5</sup> Considering the huge amount of 'black money' that is allegedly stashed away in overseas tax havens, certainly one cannot deny that there is a degree of truth in this. The most common solution proposed to solve the issue, is tougher legislation on corruption and reform of the current legislation which prevents transparency and accountability and thus protects those in the highest positions of power.<sup>6</sup>

There is a degree of validity to such arguments. However, they are problematic in that it is now abundantly clear a simple imposition or change of legislation is not enough. There are two main reasons for this. Firstly, the India Against Corruption movement is attempting to force the government to create tougher anti-corruption legislation through the Lokpal Bill. This method is inherently flawed in that the corrupt hold enough power to simply block that from happening. This is evidenced by the numerous previous attempts at introducing a 'Lokpal' Bill that have not come to fruition; between 1969 and 1998 six separate such bills have been passed in India, only to lapse with the dissolution of parliament.<sup>7</sup> Secondly, corruption has become so endemic that both politicians and government servants disregard the law with impunity; they know they can do so because the majority are doing the same thing. The attitude shown by many officials such as the PIO in the Kanpur Food Supply Department, or the RTI officer in the transport department to the RTI Act is evidence of this.<sup>8</sup> This is not to deliver a completely damning condemnation of Indian institutions. Some institutions seem to work well, and have even contributed to the clamping down on official corruption, most notably the Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG).<sup>9</sup> However, the successes of Vinod Rai are not enough, and largely focus on the bigger scandals that make the news.

Another interesting point that came up in a number of my interviews was that of the attitude of many of the Indian people. A number of interviewees expressed the view that rather than focussing on the politicians or government servants, it must be remembered that the Indian people themselves encourage corruption by offering bribes, or voting for a politician in an election simply because they have been offered 500 Rs. to do so.<sup>10</sup> In many situations, it is more financially astute to pay a bribe. For example, numerous people told me that a fine for not wearing a helmet on a motorcycle is more expensive than paying a small bribe of a few hundred rupees to a police officer. Additionally, paying a bribe has become a way of ensuring a good education or securing a job in

<sup>5</sup> Tanvir, 'Essay: Corruption In India', *Civil Service India Website*, (2012)  
<[www.civilserviceindia.com/subject/Essay/corruption-in-india1.html](http://www.civilserviceindia.com/subject/Essay/corruption-in-india1.html)>

<sup>6</sup> Sanchez, 'Corruption In India'

<sup>7</sup> Andrew Sanchez, 'Corruption In India', *London School of Economics Website*, (2012)  
<<http://www2.lse.ac.uk/IDEAS/publications/reports/pdf/SR010/sanchez.pdf>>

<sup>8</sup> Interviews with Kanpur PIO Food Supply Dept. And RTI Officer in the Transport Dept.

<sup>9</sup> Blog, 'Digging Deeper Into the Pit', *The Economist*, (2012)

<<http://www.economist.com/blogs/banyan/2012/08/corruption-india>>

<sup>10</sup> Interviews with Anurag Gaurav and Sharad Rai, both managers within Tata Cars.

government; it has become a way of easily acquiring status and prestige in India. This is important to note considering the importance of perceptions of prestige and position in Indian society. In many ways then, the people themselves need to change their mentality and stop simply waiting for the sporadic outbursts of leaders like Kejriwal and Hazare who articulate their discontent. However, this is easier said than done in a country the size of India, and where a few hundred rupees means so much to such a large percentage of the population.

The hard truth is that the corrupt hold onto power in India, and whilst they do, they will not allow wholesale clamp downs on the source of their power and wealth, even in the face of mass public outrage and the evidenced investigations of the CAG. Furthermore, any attempt at such reform will be met with staunch opposition by a huge amount of government servants; corruption is also the method through which lower civil servants supplement their own salary, which they often believe to be inadequate. To put it simply, too many people have an interest in corruption, be it petty or on a grand-scale, for anything noteworthy to be done. Moreover, an overhaul of both the political classes and government service are required for any of the above suggestions about legislation to be effective. One cannot go a week in India without seeing the 'unearthing' of some new scandal, followed by promises of prompt action from the politicians. But, to put it simply, the politicians are simply deflecting and playing another game of smoke and mirrors, with nothing actually changing. On top of this, until the priority of a large percentage of the Indian people stops being the security of their livelihood electoral and petty corruption will continue to flourish.

Yet, there is a different way to look at the situation. Whilst a solution to the problem as a whole seems impossible or a very long-way off, it is important to look at what can be done to help those normal Indians whom it affects day in, day out. That is, a way of minimising the petty corruption that takes money out of their pockets unnecessarily and stifles the urban and rural development that would make their lives easier. This is where the work of organisations like Asha Parivar and their Janta Suchna Kendra's (JSK) is highly relevant. It is a fresh way of approaching the corruption issue, and one that looks like it could pay dividends.

It is important then to take a look at the success of the JSK's themselves and how they actually go about this work. The obvious way of measuring this would be to look at how successful they have been in exposing corruption and consequently taking action against the culpable officials and the success of this. To be honest, this has been limited so far. There have been no direct exposures as a result of the centres. However, this is to take nothing away from their work as they are hampered by three things in this respect. Firstly, it is a fledgling organisation and the centres have only just been set up. As a result they are still finding their feet and establishing themselves as centres to be used within their localities. Secondly, although over 150 RTI applications have been filed through the JSK's, it is important to remember that it does take a lot of time to get the appropriate response from government officials. Thirdly, as mentioned above, by trying to primarily work through the RTI Act they are essentially trying to work through a system that is inherently set against them. As shown earlier, PIO's and local RTI officers will often ignore the RTI Act, as exemplified in the interviews with the PIO for Food Supply and two separate RTI officers based in Kanpur.<sup>11</sup> In this sense, they are in many respects banging their heads against a brick wall; officials that are meant to help them utilise the RTI Act, will not. More importantly, it is very rare that cases of official corruption at the lower levels are punished accordingly. The cases often get lost waiting in the notoriously lengthy judicial process.

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<sup>11</sup> Interviews with PIO for Food Supply, and two RTI officers in Kanpur.

However, this is not to suggest the centres are pointless, or failing. What the JSK's have done is to raise awareness amongst the Indian people that they do not have to be resigned to the status quo; that they do have a voice of their own. Through my own experience in promoting the centres, I was shocked at how many of the people we spoke to knew nothing of the RTI Act. It is only through the information distributed by the JSK and its associates that they are made aware. But more importantly, these centres, through their use of technology, have come up with a solution to the problem of citizens' applications simply being ignored by lower officials; it has provided them with a way to bypass the petty corruption of the lower levels and advance their plights to officials further up the chain. This is most clearly exemplified by the applications of labourers with the Fatehpur JSK. Through the centre they filed over fifty applications for work under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act 2005 (NREGA)<sup>12</sup>. Beforehand their requests had been ignored by local Block Development Officer (BDO). However, by filing mass applications online through the JSK the workers caught the attention of more senior officials, which led to the transfer of the concerned BDO. More importantly, it also led to the increase of collaboration between workers and an increase of online applications. This quite clearly demonstrates how the JSK's can be used as a platform to raise a voice and genuinely help Indian citizens in the short-term; something that the large scale anti-corruption movements do not provide.

Overall then, it seems the issue of corruption follows a pattern in public life; one of public outrage followed by promised reform and mud-slinging. But as shown throughout India's independent history, the problem of corruption remains whilst the corrupt monopolise politics and governance. There has emerged a situation where power is held by a majority who have no interest in getting rid of corruption, as it is the source of their wealth and power. Although India has recently seen one of the largest movements against the state for decades, its leaders sought to once again work through the system and create new legislation to monitor and repress corruption. This is a method which, in my opinion, cannot work as a majority of those manning the institutions of power already ignore the rule of law, and will continue to do so. This is not to suggest that some sort of revolution is necessary. What is needed is a complete overhaul of the political and governmental system that can begin to help clean it up, but it is hard to see how this can be brought about in the near future. However, there are organisations such as Asha Parivar and their JSK project that have developed a new way of looking at the problem and may have come up with a solution that can help alleviate the added strain petty corruption brings to the lives of the average Indian citizen. Although the centres may not be a direct solution to solving the whole problem, they do bring awareness to the Indian people about the provisions in place for them such as NREGA and RTI, but more importantly they subsequently provide them with a voice and a way to unite those voices successfully. Consequently, through this they can bypass the stifling petty corruption in the localities and help bring meaningful short-term changes to their lives. When one takes this into account, it does not seem wrong to think that this is more effective in helping solve the issue of corruption than the CAG or the India Against Corruption movement.

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<sup>12</sup> NREGA stipulates that at request officials must guarantee 100 days of employment every financial year to adult members of any rural-household.