

Corruption and Public Life

Corruption in public life is not anything new to the Indian polity. However, the recent exposures have revealed levels of degradation that is ever-deepening and getting more entrenched. The tentacles of corruption have spread on to every element of the social structure and the various institutions. The very institutions that must protect and guard the public have themselves become victims of it. The size and magnitude of the various scams just keep growing bigger, as though the sky is the limit. Be it the fodder scam, the stock market scam, the Bofors issue or the latest, the stamp paper scam, the amount of money involved and the spread of the effects seem mind-boggling. What is worrying is the courage with which the perpetrators are walking around; the brazenness with which they annihilate anyone who dares to challenge them and the public apathy that too seems becoming heavier.

The primacy of political corruption cannot be denied. In a democratic country where the will of the people should be guarded through their elected representatives, any devaluation of standards in the political elite can have disastrous results. It is here that the country has seen its nadir. Political leadership has become so corrupt and arrogant that in many cases the so-called people's representatives do not even have time to listen to them. Democracy itself is in threat due to the precarious condition of democratic institutions. It is a truism that any democracy is as good as the people who manage it. Indian democracy continues to be let down by politicians, both ruling and opposition. They have made corruption look like a normal thing. A typical instance is the prevarication of the politicians on issues of corruption and their attitude to the institution of Lok Pal. Over the last decade or so, the Lok Pal has gone through such vagaries that one hopes the latest moves do not turn out to be another lead in the farcical history of Indian political reforms. Similar is the issue of election funding. Until a satisfactory solution is found to curtail the huge expenses on election, corruption is likely to remain.

What is often neglected is the role of cultural, particularly religious beliefs and attitudes in the ever-growing corrupt practices in social and economic life. Culture as a major determinant of human behaviour, defines, regulates and ultimately controls even corruption. Values, particularly moral and religious, have a significant role in controlling and

eliminating corruption. In the contemporary society, the very guardians of values themselves have fallen victim to forces of corruption. What should be counter-cultural forces, be it religious movements, ecological movements, non-governmental organisations of various hues and colours, instead they themselves have become major players in the world of corruption. Two major trends seem to explain this fact: increasing consumerist tendencies and growing desire for institutional power. Ideologies, beliefs and struggles and their organisational forms have determined the history of human civilisations. However, the 20th century has seen the fall from favour of major ideologies, which had ignited the revolutionary and counter-cultural trends of human history. The homogenisation processes are threatening the very rich labyrinth of human culture and civilisation.

In the debate on combating corruption the focus is invariably on the systems and structures and hardly ever on the individual. While it may be true that until systemic changes are brought about, corruption may not be ruled out, the key to eliminating corruption from social and political life remains the individual in his or her every day transactions. When the unknown citizen refuses to bribe or use influence for unsocial or selfish interests, then corruption gets checked. When individuals like Dubey (the engineer who was done away with for fighting corruption) fight, then there is the possibility of change.

Gandhiji's relevance in these times is unquestionable. The awareness and practice of the non-violence and non-greediness can lead to rooting out of corruption. When people are ready to see the seven social evils identified and forever fought by Gandhiji (commerce without morality, education without character, pleasure without conscience, politics without principles, science without humanity, wealth without work, worship without sacrifice) there could be changes.

But then, is anyone listening to Gandhiji at all?

Chief Editor