

IS CORRUPTION A DIRTY WORD?

Ashwani Lohani

Even after forty-six years of existence of which twenty-five have been spent in the governmental sector in the country in various capacities, I am still not able to decide whether corruption is a 'dirty' word. I often find that majority of people I interact with, are apparently living beyond their known sources of income, have no convictions or morals, lack basic commitment to the organization and the nation and even then are considered not corrupt unless proved otherwise. My brain then long conditioned by the prevalent norms of the society says, "No, it is not" while my heart tempered more by ethics and moral values and a spiritual upbringing shouts, "Yes, it is". The dilemma continues!

Recently a contractor who worked for me in one of my previous avatar of a CEO visited me, perhaps out of regard some people command irrespective of the seat they are sitting on. After initial small talk, I bluntly asked him whether he, while executing the contract had to grease the palms of the minions working under me. An embarrassing and also uncommon question! But I have been known to be rather blunt in matters involving integrity. After beating about the bush for some time, he finally summoned the courage to accept that he too, despite my direct involvement in the contract could not avoid paying the ten-percent. The only saving grace, he mentioned was that the system had agreed to provide him, as a very special case, a single window under the table service. I felt upset and also hurt. I wondered why he did not bring this to my attention, even when he and everyone else knew of my clean image and swift and also ruthless decision making ability. The answer he gave says it all

"There are so many people involved and the file keeps on shuffling between so many tables for perpetual checks and clearances. Everyone out there uses his negative powers and the bureaucracy is immense. If I had told you and you had taken up one person, the rest of the gang would have created enough hurdles to have stalled my contract or penalized me otherwise. I therefore chose the practical option of buying speed."

The guy was dead right. It was the complexity of the stifling bureaucracy to blame not the poor individual in its grip. The bureaucracy out there was not stifling corruption by making things difficult to happen, but stifling deliverance and promoting corruption. In my view, it is very simple. If a hundred thumb impressions are required for every decision or action, then a lot of people will make money, pass the buck or delay matters as the system gives absolute immunity from being nailed directly, either for making money or for incompetence. If only one or two thumb impressions were involved, the owners of the thumbs would get easily identified and exposed and matters would be set right without delay. My failure in overhauling the system and making it simple and transparent then slowly dawned on me. But it would have required a major surgery with its attendant complications. Perhaps, then being under siege on so many fronts, I could not summon the courage required for the surgery. But I have always firmly believed that the answer to most of our ills lies in making things simple to happen. When are we as a society or as a system going to realize the benefits that will accrue by reducing the number of thumb impressions from hundred to one or two? Besides

eliminating corruption, as the immunity provided by numbers would cease to exist, productivity would also shoot up and as a by-product generate clear accountability for deliverance or the lack of it. However, while making things simple to happen would be the correct thing to do, we perpetually continue to live in a fool's paradise that making things difficult to happen will make it difficult to make money.

It is the same everywhere. There is not a single contract anywhere in the system where money is not changing hands, also under the table. Every checkpoint or a check-post has converted itself into a moneymaking business, and that is why we have lucrative, not so lucrative and dry postings, cutting across services and levels. If we think otherwise, we are living in a fool's paradise. This is happening despite the presence of elaborate vigilance setups, which instead of curbing corruption are in fact making a significant contribution to the cause of escalating it. **One more sentry to be taken care of at one more checkpoint.** Perhaps I have become paranoid. Obsessed with the need for deliverance and the need to maintain high standards of probity in public life, I find myself compelled to take issue on tasks generally found pleasant by the majority. Perhaps being a Bharatvasi to the core, I feel hurt when the country is being bled by the corrupt and non-performers, both categories being Omni-present in our rotten system.

My younger daughter is nine years old. If someday I go senile and implement true democracy at home and in the process allow everyone including the nine year-old to take their own decisions, there is absolutely no doubt that she will end up ruining her life and in the process also cause a lot of discomfort to the other members of the family. This is exactly what happened to Bharatvarsh in 1947. An immature and non-visionary society, a society with a ridiculously low literacy rate was allowed to govern itself and that too democratically. And look where we have arrived, at the bottom of the list of nations with the exception of perhaps Bangladesh, Nepal and few other countries of no consequence. Is this the path we want to continue to follow in the 21st century? Do we want to be a country of glaring contrasts, a superpower that does not even raise an eyebrow when a large chunk of the residents of its capital city use railway tracks for morning ablutions? A country which wants to be a global preacher without even being able to provide basic education, water, electricity, sanitation and housing to most of its citizens?

I am of the firm opinion that corruption is more a symptom of a deep-rooted malaise within the decision making processes in the governmental system, than a disease by itself. I also strongly believe that corruption and productivity are linked directly not inversely. I do not see any merit in beating about the bush and living in a world, which does not believe in but still keeps on harping, that sincere efforts are being taken to eradicate corruption. I would rather just make things simple to happen and then see the last nail on the coffin of corruption. How I wish that we Indians who ape the west in so many superficial and cosmetic things, for once, starts aping their working systems, procedures and decision making processes for the good of the society.