

By Afsana Rashid\*

Each and every section of society, be it politics, bureaucracy, police, judiciary or nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are affected by corruption in India.

“India’s problem isn’t poverty; it’s corruption,” says a political commentator in Bangalore, who asked to remain anonymous. “Infrastructure here is poor, not because we don’t have money for projects, but because it’s eaten away,” he adds.

Malik Jehangir, a senior journalist in Jammu and Kashmir, says, “In the past, bribes were paid for getting wrong things done, but now bribes are paid for accomplishing right jobs.”

Whether they are ministers, senior police officers or other government officials, indicted suspects are all able to enjoy the comforts of life despite their alleged involvement in murder, molestation and embezzlement cases.

In July 2008, *The Washington Times* reported that nearly one fourth of 540 Indian Parliament members faced criminal charges, including human trafficking, immigration rackets, embezzlement, rape and murder.

Bashir Ahmad Malla, retired deputy inspector general of police in Kashmir, says: “Government rewards corrupt officers and transfers or demotes honest and upright officials.”

In the Jan. 16, 2009 *India Abroad* article, “Corruption in India like Africa: WB official,” managing editor Aziz Haniffa quotes former bank auditor Steve Berkman, who says that barring IT giants Satyam and Wipro from World Bank projects is only the tip of the iceberg, compared to the kickbacks and commissions that go to government officials for approval of bank projects.

Corruption hits the poor

The India Corruption Study 2007 by Transparency International India and the Centre for Media Studies highlights that corruption is rampant, even in issuing below-poverty-line (BPL) status to households living in rural states.

According to the study, one third of Indian households below poverty line paid 8,830 rupees (US\$191) as bribes

to government officials for various public services.

Poor households also either pay bribes or use political influence to get benefits from the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, which was started by the government to provide time-specific employment.

The All India Council of Technical Education (AICTE) monitors and regulates approximately 15,500 professional institutes across the country, but it has been facing charges of corruption and unethical business conduct, including the approval of professional colleges that don't meet necessary requirements. Such institutes are only adding numbers, as they don't churn out talented professionals.

In June 2009, the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) conducted raids across Indian cities, including Delhi and Hyderabad, and arrested AICTE officials.

1. Narayan Rao, member secretary of AICTE, was caught red-handed on June 16 accepting bribes. He was arrested along with commission agent, S.B. Subba Rao, for receiving a bribe of 500,000 rupees (US\$10,827).

The bribe in question was given by an individual who runs his own engineering college in the state of Andhra Pradesh. The member secretary had asked for a bribe in lieu of inspection and approval of the college.

According to Harsh Bhal, a spokesman for the CBI, the agency raided offices across India and seized incriminating documents. Bhal added that the CBI has filed corruption charges against AICTE Chairman R.A. Yadav, Advisor H.C. Rai, Deputy Director Robinder Randhawa and Regional Officer Sriom Dalal. According to Bhal, these senior officials were charged for demanding bribes to increase the number of students in engineering colleges in Faridabad, Haryana.

The question is: Can the government show the will to get rid of these corrupt officials, who are no more than a blot on the education system?

Considering the government's past record, we can predict that these corrupt officials will resume their duties in due time, because bureaucrats and politicians are hand in glove, and they do their best to save each other.

Corruption and lack of accountability can be vividly seen in public affair dealings, leading to hardships for the masses.

Dr. Abdul Rashid Malik, former deputy director of health services at Sher-i-Kashmir Institute of Medical Sciences, one of the premier medical institutions in India, says doctors take commissions from pharmaceutical companies if they prescribe medicines from those companies only.

“Doctors, in general, receive commissions from diagnostic and investigation centers, and that’s the worst form of corruption,” says Malik.

Diagnostic tools and other machines are deliberately made to be dysfunctional in hospitals and other health institutions, forcing patients to have tests done at private diagnostic centers, when they could have been easily carried out in government hospitals at lower prices, according to Malik.

### The Judiciary System

The India Political Blog accuses some judges of deciding cases based on external factors and of misusing money. The blog quotes an example where the CBI unearthed shocking details about how the pension funds of employees of Ghaziabad courts were illegally spent on furniture, crockery, mobiles, gadgets, laptops, rail tickets and other luxury items for judges.

Inaction by the judiciary and the police in the murder case of Aarushi Talwar, a 15-year-old girl whose throat was slit in her own bed in 2008, is causing people to lose faith in the judiciary and the police.

Danishta Hassan, a counselor with a nongovernmental organization in Western India, says that direct engagement of suspicious characters in corrupt practices within the Indian judiciary causes enormous delays in delivering justice.

In addition, thousands of habeas corpus petitions are pending in courts in Jammu and Kashmir, according to a study by the South Asia Forum for Human Rights and the Centre for Law and Development.

In India it is exceedingly hard to remove a sitting judge, especially in higher courts. The case involving Justice Ramaswamy was the first of such kind that reached Parliament in 1990. Parliament ultimately didn’t vote to impeach him, because members of Parliament decided to abstain.

### Police and the army

G.P. Joshi, program coordinator of the Indian branch of the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative in New Delhi, says the main issue concerning police violence is the lack of accountability.

“Tortures lead to deaths in custody,” says Gagan Lembang, a human rights activist in northeast India. Police often torture innocent people in a bid to shield influential and wealthy offenders.”

Referring to the annual report of the comptroller and auditor general of India, news reports say the army is purchasing faulty boots. According to these reports, the army has been purchasing faulty boots since 2002 from an Italian firm. These boots don't work when temperatures plummet below negative 15 degrees Celsius, and temperatures can go down to negative 50 degrees Celsius.

The report also says the army continues to procure boots from this same company, and it blames corruption in general for the death of 328 army soldiers in Siachen. Details on how corruption was a factor in those deaths were not available to the public as of the writing of this notebook.

The report also found that one brigadier of the Indian army was sending water in the place of petrol to soldiers based at Siachen.

#### Public hearings reveal more corruption

Public hearings, known as Jan Sunwai, are designed to allow citizens to question their government representatives, and they have been used to publicly highlight various corrupt practices.

A public hearing organized by Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan at Janwaad-Rajasthan found that many people who came to work every day were marked absent and were paid less, unearthing a scam worth 40 million rupees (US\$866.175).

Similarly, a social audit was conducted by the citizen's initiative, Parivartan, along with local residents of two resettlement colonies of northeast Delhi, Sundernagri and New Seemapuri. The audit looked at work performed by the engineering department of the Municipal Corporation of Delhi, and it found misappropriation of funds.

Out of 68 works audited and discussed in public hearings, it is estimated that in 64 works, 13 million rupees (US\$281,507) was misappropriated. Within these projects, the total embezzled amount found on accounts of missing items or works is approximately 7 million rupees (US\$151,580).

Corruption has also crept into religious institutions, as some church members are allegedly making money by selling baptism certificates, and Imams (Muslim clerics) have been accused of taking bribes to issue random decrees.

“Too many loopholes let officials and politicians get away with corruption, even if there are investigations,” says Inder Singh, a resident of Chandigarh. It’s hard to trace money given directly to politicians, as they keep their assets in the name of other people.”

A social activist in Gujarat says that corruption leads to criminalization of politics, with people getting fed up with politicians and the system.

Ashutosh Sharma, a postgraduate student in political science at Madhya Pradesh Bhoj Open University at Bhopal, says, “People should have a right to recall elected representatives if they see them becoming indifferent to the electorate.”

## Fixing corruption

The former president of India, Dr. Avul Pakir Jainulabideen Abdul Kalam, believes that a strong youth movement can remove corruption in India.

However, a researcher in North India, who asked to remain anonymous, believes that corruption, deceit and falsehood in India have cultural roots.

“It’s impossible to root out corruption in a hierarchical unequal society where corruption is institutionalized,” the researcher says.

1. Rajan, director of Arogya Agam, a Tamil Nadu-based NGO that fights corruption, believes that corruption will never go away because people want to become rich overnight.

“If this continues, [the] oppressed and marginalized will become poorer and [the] rich richer,” says Rajan.

Mehfuz Ali, a resident of Pune, thinks that it may not be possible to wipe out corruption completely. “But its level

can be brought down by roping in honest and dedicated persons and controlling electoral expenses,” he says.

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