

By Ritu Sarin

These reminders keep cropping up, and it isn't a coincidence. As a reporter and a right-minded citizen, I have never handled a bribe or paid for information. But all around me, incidents keep reminding me of how widespread corruption is in the bustling Indian capital, where outside every government office, the Central Vigilance Commission (CVC) has hung notices reminding citizens that paying bribes is a crime.

First, a close family friend recently confessed he had, through a back channel, paid a hefty bribe of 689,235 rupees (US\$15,000) to a district judge for settling a property dispute between him and the Delhi Development Authority (DDA).

My friend won the case, but the DDA challenged the order in the Delhi High Court. Having paid up once, my friend realized a second bribe must now be paid, this time to a High Court judge.

Then, just a few days ago, my driver called me very distressed late at night. He was seeking my help in bailing out his brother. The brother, also a driver, had knocked down a cyclist. The cyclist had sustained head injuries, and the brother was now in a police custody. I said I would look into the matter the following day.

The next morning, my driver nonchalantly informed me that his brother was back on duty. The police had demanded a bribe of 10,000 rupees (US\$215) to avoid a formal complaint, but they had settled at 4,000 rupees (US\$86). That is roughly the equivalent to a driver's monthly salary.

More unwritten rules of the road came my way while having breakfast at a neighbor's house. Her teenaged son had just received his driver's license and was being advised by his mother about how to handle the traffic police, omnipresent on Delhi roads.

"Quietly hand over 100 rupees (US\$2) to the constable. Otherwise, they will send you a *challan* (traffic citation) at home." The boy acquiesced. It was his first, willing lesson on getting the better of the authorities in Delhi.

A property dispute, a road accident or a brush with the traffic police – these are instances of how people in my immediate circle recently resorted to paying bribes, and without much compunction. Over the years, despite several massive corruption scams being exposed, the malaise of corruption has festered. With more than a billion people, roughly a quarter of whom live in poverty, fighting high-level and petty corruption is a huge administrative and social problem.

In October 2005, Transparency International India (TII) tried to put a figure on the spread of the country's corruption problem.

The corruption study polled 14,000 respondents, 62 percent of whom admitted they had first-hand experience of paying bribes to access public services. Hardly 10 percent of the respondents said they felt corruption was on the decline. The report estimated the total sum of bribes paid to access public services at more than 208 billion rupees (US\$4.5 billion).

Among the services accounting for the most bribes being paid, the police topped, followed by the lower judiciary, land administration, government hospitals and schools. The corruption survey showed, for instance, that bribes were routinely paid for gaining admission to schools or to receive diagnostic services in a public hospital.

According to former Naval Chief, Admiral R. H. Tahiliani, Chairman of Transparency International India, the 2005 report reveals the disparity in corruption patterns in developed and developing countries.

“In the United States, the average citizen may not be affected by corruption. But in India, corruption is rampant at the grass-root level, since citizens have to pay bribes for services they are entitled to. Corruption everyday affects the poorest of the poor,” he said.

Adding to this burden is the distressing frequency with which corruption has been exposed in several of the Government's poverty alleviation programs.

A recent World Bank study exposed endemic corruption in the disbursement of bank credit to farmers in states like Andhra Pradesh, where scores of farmers have committed suicide due to crippling debt. The study pegged the going bribe rate at 6.5 percent of the value of the approved loans.

Before this, corruption scams have been unearthed in the distribution of grain under the Public Distribution Scheme (PDS), even in Delhi. As a result, the Supreme Court in July 2005 asked the Delhi Government to publish all PDS data on its Web site.

The Supreme Court's ruling was only a reiteration of TII's findings, which said that Delhi's PDS was the second most corrupt after that of Bihar, where it has been suggested that 64 percent of grain meant for citizens living in poverty was pilfered and sold in the open market. Last year in Bihar, more than 165 million rupees (US\$3.6 million) intended for flood relief just disappeared.

With an increasingly activist judiciary and a combative press, corruption scandals abound and often overlap. Consider some of the major scams exposed this year:

In December 2005, a sting operation conducted by a TV channel caught 11 members of Parliament accepting bribes for asking questions in Parliament. All the MPs involved in the "cash-for-query" scandal were expelled from Parliament.

Shortly afterwards, a similar undercover operation exposed MPs demanding as much as a 45 percent commission for allotting projects to fake companies from their annual development funds. These MPs have since been suspended.

Three senior officials working on the India-U.S. cyber security forum were arrested on charges of espionage. The evidence has revealed that one of them received 551,388 rupees (US\$12,000) for selling secrets to an American diplomat.

Following a Public Interest Litigation filed in the Delhi High Court, municipal authorities submitted a list of 18,000 unauthorized residential and commercial properties in the capital, which are now being demolished (the list of owners

included several politicians). When the demolition drive began, several owners admitted they had paid bribes for the illegal constructions.

Today, even the government's corruption-busters admit it may take years, even decades, for any cleansing drive to yield tangible results.

"Corruption is not declining and this is also because fighting corruption cannot only be a law enforcement issue. The [Central Bureau of Investigation] deals with cases of corruption among central government employees, while all projects dealing with poverty alleviation, development and infrastructure are monitored by state governments," said Vijay Shankar, Director of the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), India's premier anti-corruption bureau,

Parliament was recently informed that the CBI was waiting for authorization to prosecute 91 government officials, mostly from the Ministry of Finance.

"A positive aspect is that courts have taken some stringent measures to expose corruption and the government has also initiated useful administrative reforms," Shankar added. "But the fact remains that politicizing corruption suits everyone and the polity must now ensure it has one view on corruption."

That, unfortunately, remains an elusive ideal for an India in the grips of the politics of victimization, where each political regime exposes the graft or corruption of its predecessors, especially in cases of major purchases and defense deals.

Also, there are two crucial pieces of legislation that successive governments have avoided introducing. The first is the Lok Pal Bill, aimed at preventing corruption in high political offices, which has been in the works for more than three decades and has been again put on hold by the present Manmohan Singh government.

The other is an initiative for rooting out corruption from the Judiciary via the proposed National Judicial Council, which has been "under examination" of the chief justice for months.

However, some landmark initiatives need special mention. Two years ago, again following the Supreme Court's intervention, the government made the CVC the primary office for receiving complaints of whistle-blowers and passed the "Public Interest Disclosures and Protection of Informers" resolution.

Last year, the government brought in the "Right To Information" bill, which is increasingly being used to expose wrongdoing and corruption.

"Ensuring transparency and exposing corruption was one of the objectives of the government while bringing in the Right to Information Act," said Wajahad Habibullah, the country's first chief information commissioner. "I hope the act will be increasingly used for this."