

Editorial

Corruption isn't just "abuse of public office for private gain". In India, if not in most developing countries, it has become a political disease.

When governments do nothing about corruption and make no genuine effort to formulate and implement policies to address it, then corruption becomes political.

Developing countries are already struggling to address issues of poverty, inequality and injustice. Corruption adds yet another burden. As Kofi Annan said in his statement on the adoption of the United Nations Convention against Corruption by the General Assembly, New York in November 2003, "Corruption hurts the poor disproportionately – by diverting funds intended for development, undermining a government's ability to provide basic services, feeding inequality and injustice, and discouraging foreign investment and aid."

In our editorial in the April 2006 issue of IJRS, we too pointed out that "Corruption has no positive effects. It hits the poor hardest, it makes a mockery of financial systems and it actively works against the legitimacy of the state."

Recently, INTAF (International Task Force for the Rural Poor) held a national conference at Amarpurkashi in November 2011. The topic was "Corruption and its effects on the Rural Poor". Two days of intensive discussion resulted in nine conclusions which were sent to the Honourable Speaker of the Lok Sabha and Honourable Chairman of the Rajya Sabha. In essence, they urged the government to pass a simple, strong and effective Lokayukt Bill that would protect the interests of the rural poor including the illiterate and semi-literate.

Most people in India are all too aware of corruption. They read about it every day in the newspapers or hear about it on television – vast scams which earn incredible sums of money for their perpetrators. But what they never read about and what is never reported in the news is corruption at the lowest level, the kind of corruption that affects 70% of the population on a daily basis.

One example is banks. Their main business is to lend money. To begin with, a loan application has to be made. For an illiterate or semi-literate villager, this is the first hurdle. He

must pay someone to fill in the application form. He also has to produce various certificates and guarantees on oath. They cost him more money. Now he hands in the application. However, no one at the bank will even look at it until a bribe has been paid or guaranteed through a middleman. He is the one who negotiates the bribe which will be shared with the bank staff. If the loan is one which merits a subsidy, the client never receives the full amount. A share of the subsidy is subtracted first.

Then there is the Registrar's office. This is where stamp duties are collected and deeds of purchase, wills, contracts and trusts registered. Stamp duty and revenue taxes are determined according to the valuation of property. In every case, a bribe has to be paid or nothing is done. On top of this, everything must be written in the correct legal language so a legal clerk has to be paid to do this.

Next there is the Tehsil's office where an ordinary citizen has to go for permanent residence certificates, birth and death certificates, valuations, copies of land records, registration of change of ownership of land or house, registration of a voter, applying for a ration card and filing complaints about encroachment of land or destruction of property. Again, nothing is done unless a bribe is paid. A simple villager not aware of this has to find a middleman to help him and that of course involves further payment.

The most corrupt of all is the Indian police. Few villagers dare go to their local police station if they can help it. The whole atmosphere is unfriendly, intimidating and unco-operative. And, of course, nothing is done without payment of a bribe. Even a simple thing like registering an FIR cannot be done unless a bribe is paid.

In theory, the government provides health services free and indeed, there are fully equipped and staffed government hospitals in every town and a community hospital in every block. There are a few small hospitals in large villages but no doctor or auxiliary nurse lives in a village so the hours that these hospitals open are very limited. The staff treat rural patients very brusquely and frequently demand bribes for giving medicines but complaints against them never achieve anything.

In government hospitals in towns, it is well known that the day medicines arrive, they disappear. They are, of course, meant to be distributed free to patients but instead, the doctors write a prescription and send patients off to buy the medicine from local chemists.

One of the jobs of the Chief Medical Officer and his staff is to control the practices of unqualified medical practitioners or quacks yet everywhere in rural areas, quacks are doing a flourishing business and only have to pay a regular bribe to government staff.

In U.P., the minister in charge of the National Rural Health Mission which runs family planning and child welfare programmes has been sacked because of allegations of corruption which were also connected to the murder of three officials. Despite this, any complaints from the common man are still dealt with within this department.

A particularly serious area of corruption is education. Whether at primary, secondary or tertiary level, all centres of learning have become centres of corruption of one kind or another.

The corruption begins at primary level. Teachers in government primary schools are extremely highly paid, at least ten times more than those in private schools. Yet study after study has shown that they rarely attend, hardly do any teaching and have no interest in the children they are supposed to be educating. They pass the time chatting, often to the women who prepare the midday meal. These women don't have much to do since only a quarter of the children marked present in the register actually attend and have a meal. The unused raw material is distributed among the teachers, the village *pradhan*, the Fair Price shopkeeper, the Supply Inspector and the Block Resource Centre. These same people also share the money from any scholarships, uniforms and books that have not been distributed. Hardly surprising, therefore, that the job of teaching in a government primary school is one of the most sought after.

The situation is no better in secondary schools where corruption takes a different form but also flourishes. In class, the teachers put notes from the textbooks on the blackboard and sit back while pupils copy them into their exercise books. That's all the teaching that is done. However, they expect all pupils to come

to early morning classes for private tuition and any student who can't afford tuition faces a hard time from the teachers.

There is fierce competition among schools to be selected as examination centres and large bribes are paid to achieve this. Pupils pay money to the teachers who then arrange mass copying in the examinations. The office of the District Inspector of Schools is a centre of corruption not only for the approval of examination centres but for the distribution of government scholarships. As well as this, when schools apply to be recognised as high schools and inter colleges, large bribes have to be paid all along the line, from office clerks to the minister in charge. It makes no difference that the school has complied with all the rules and regulations regarding recognition, bribes have to be paid or the file will just sit in the education office and nothing will be done.

In tertiary education, the only difference is that the bribes that have to be paid to get anything done are even larger. The rules state that all degree colleges must be affiliated with a recognised university. It should, of course, be a simple matter of checking that the college has fulfilled all the requirements and submitted the necessary paperwork. A college that does all that and then expects affiliation is foolish and naïve indeed. A few years ago, seven vice-chancellors were sacked by the Governor of U.P. because of blatant corruption. These vice-chancellors did not feel discredited at all. Today, one of them is principal of a large government-aided college.

The same kind of corruption occurs when a college wants to add more subjects to the curriculum it offers or appoint new staff. The bribes that the college has to pay are shared out among staff of the education departments and the minister responsible. Another area where corruption is rampant is in practical examinations for subjects such as science and professional subjects like B.Ed. and M.Ed.

We can only hope that the anti-corruption bill that the government eventually passes will deal effectively with this so that the rural poor are no longer handicapped at every step of the way.