

Editorial

Corruption and the Role of Anthropologists

In the night of August 9, 2024, a heinous crime was committed in a medical college and hospital in Kolkata (India). A young doctor on duty was raped and killed. The exact causes underlying this criminal act have not yet been unearthed; formal investigations are ongoing. From various circumstantial evidence it has been speculated that she was privy to many corrupt practices prevailing not just in the medical college and hospital but also in the health department of the local government, and had possibly protested against some of these practices. I shall refrain from mentioning any of these corrupt practices; many are well-known.

The incident resulted in an unprecedented social upheaval throughout India. Most of the spontaneous protest marches and gatherings were in Kolkata. Young doctors provided leadership, but members of the civil society joined in very large numbers. Protests were also held in the semi-urban and rural regions of West Bengal. Soon, doctors and members of the civil society also started to organize protest marches in many other cities of India. The most noteworthy feature of the protests against the heinous crime was the spontaneous and enthusiastic participation of common men and women across the length and breadth of our nation. This in spite of the fact that the incident took place in Kolkata. It appeared that every person-on-the-street felt as though the incident took place in her or his backyard. Such involvement of the general populace protesting against a crime has never been witnessed in independent India, perhaps.

I had organized and participated in some protest marches surrounding this incident. This provided me with an opportunity to discuss with a cross-section of members of the society to understand the diversity of motivations underlying their participation in the protest. It became clear to me that there was very little diversity in motivation. First, most participated in disgust against the rape and murder of the young doctor. Many felt that such criminal acts may also be perpetrated against their own daughters; therefore, one way to prevent is to protest. Second, most were also completely disgusted with the prevailing social climate; they were also protesting against the corruption that has completely engulfed the Indian society.

Corruption in society may start with petty actions of financial corruption; payment of money to obtain some favours. But we in India have graduated from petty corruption. As Paulo Mauro (1998) has said “You live in a society where everybody steals. Do you choose to steal? The probability that you will be caught is low ... and, even if you are caught, the chances of your being punished severely for a crime so common are low. Therefore, you too steal. By contrast, if you live in a society where theft is rare, the chances of your being caught and punished are high, so you choose not to steal.” We choose to engage in corrupt practices in India. The social milieu is very conducive to indulging in corruption.

Corruption is a slippery concept. Bardhan (1997) has discussed this aspect in some detail. “Abuse of entrusted power for private profit” is corruption as Transparency International has defined. Another definition that has been proposed is “the abuse of public office for private gain” (World Bank, 2002). What starts as petty act between two individuals, often gets entrenched in the society over a period of time. Corruption may also be defined as deviant behaviour in which a public servant engages in favour of private or personal gain. In other words, corrupt behaviour is that which 'harms the public-interest' (Friedrich, 1966; Heidenheimer, 1989a, 1989b). Dynamic forces and processes come into play during the period of entrenchment of corruption in social life. These processes result in the formation of power strata in society. Philosophers, political scientists and social scientists, including anthropologists, have proposed a theory – called the “elite theory” – that describes and explains power relationships in society. The theory posits that a small minority of members of society – the elites – accumulate economic and social power and become decision makers. The elites usually retain power even with change in State governance. Corruption gets redefined as the abuse of public office for gain of the minority “elite” community, not just of an individual. In his book *The Power Elite* (1956), C. Wright Mills characterized the power elite group as a tight network of politicians, corporate executives and military. This network also has interlocking connections with the police and organized crime. These groups try to maintain order in society through violence. In other words, members of the power elite occupy 'strategic command posts of the social structure,' and hence wield control on large sections of the society. The common person in society is powerless and vulnerable to manipulation by the 'power elite.'

In the instance of the recent incident in Kolkata, it is easy to relate ourselves to the 'power elite.' Our hope in the ongoing struggle in the form of the protest marches and gatherings is that the structure of the power elite will be dismantled. However, this is no easy

task. The struggle needs to be sustained. As I have stated before, the expansion of corruption from a petty scale to a grand scale – when illicit transaction is not simply between a pair of individuals – is a dynamic process. The dynamics have not been well-studied. Without understanding the dynamics, it may be impossible to dismantle the power structure. Anthropologists have the required wherewithal to study and draw generalizable conclusions about the dynamics of formation of the power elite. If important links in the networks and interlocking connections can be identified, it may be possible to intercept and break the links or prevent their formation. As Shore and Haller (2005) have written “corruption merits closer anthropological attention simply because of its inexplicable pervasiveness and the curious fascination that people, in almost every part of the world, seem to have with stories of corruption. In this sense corruption represents both an ethnographic enigma and a 'social fact' in the classical Durkheimian sense.”

Although corruption starts from individual acts, eventually it becomes a national phenomenon. Sometimes, national governments make attempts to prevent corruption. For example, in 1962, the Government of India appointed the Santhanam Committee on Prevention of Corruption. The committee was chaired by K. Santhanam, a Parliamentarian, and included four other members of the Parliament and two senior officers. The committee's work focussed on: (a) Identifying and preventing poor management and wasteful spending in government agencies, (b) Examining various aspects of corruption in government departments, and (c) Recommending measures to check corruption. The committee's recommendations included: (a) Establishing the Central Vigilance Commission (which was established in 1964), (b) Setting up administrative vigilance divisions in all major government organizations and departments, (c) Streamlining administrative procedures, (d) Simplifying rules and regulations, (e) Implementing technology-driven solutions, (f) Emphasizing accountability and openness in public procurement, decision-making processes, and financial administration. Even though implementation of most of these recommendations perhaps helped contain corruption at the national level, the impact of their implementation have not been palpable.

When corruption becomes widespread, people's cultural practices and values change. People become subservient to the power elite; they completely lose the urge to protest. Fear engulfs them completely. Values and practices that were outliers become established norms. Corruption is certainly not a basic characteristic of humans. Empirical studies are required to identify the significant determinants and their impacts by longitudinal studies on corruption.

Such studies will have ethical ramifications. However, without identities of determinants and estimates of their impact, possible remedies of corruption will remain unclear. For example, Rijckeghem and Weder (1997) have found a negative correlation between civil service wage level and the level of corruption. We also need to answer questions such as: is corruption becoming more rampant? can corruption increase indefinitely? is there an 'equilibrium level' of corruption? Corruption leads to an overall social degeneration, not just to increase in criminal acts. Anthropologists as a professional group can help identify avenues to prevent social degeneration resulting from institutionalization of corruption.

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