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Corruption: How India Differs From Developed Nations...

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Although corruption is rampant at the grassroots level, people have signalled that it's not business as usual any more.



Ever since Anna Hazare launched his anti-graft movement earlier this year, reams of newsprint and exabytes of online space have been spent dissecting and analysing corruption in India. Nearly every aspect of corruption in the country has been explored and every socio-political theory related to it has been examined in the Indian context.

A question repeatedly asked was why did it take the Indian masses, who seemingly tolerated corrupt politicians and bureaucrats all these years, so long to revolt against them?

Many have argued that the proverbial final straw was the scale of corruption, which has shocked the Indian middle class to act. It is true, to some extent. As evidenced by the 2G spectrum and the Commonwealth Games scams, in the 'liberalised' India, the illicit transactions are in billions of dollars, as opposed to a few millions in the 'good old days' of pre-liberalisation.

But the increased circulation of money alone doesn't explain the staggering level, scale, breadth and volume of corruption in India. Bigger economies, such as the USA and Japan, and other developed nations, which have much bigger per capita income than India, are not crippled by corruption.

Corruption is not a phenomenon invented by Indians and for that matter, it is not something unique to the developing world. It is found in developed countries, too. In the USA, for instance, a number of governors, and state and federal officials have been jailed in graft-related charges in recent years.

Yet, when one compares India and the USA, there are qualitative and quantitative differences. In the USA, corruption doesn't affect the middle class and the poor people the way it does in India. Americans are not forced to bribe officials on a day-to-day basis, for even the most basic services.

On the other hand, in India, corruption is rampant at the grassroots level, fuelled by the relatively low wages of the public officials and the centralised nature of dispensing services, both at the state level and the federal level.

From getting a birth certificate for a newborn to obtaining an individual's death certificate, and from enrolling a child at a school to applying for jobs, citizens pay bribes in India as though it is a mandatory thing. Every mundane activity – getting a ration card, securing a passport or purchasing a train ticket – leaves scope for bribery. Even if one is averse to paying bribe, the system doesn't leave any choice.

In the USA and other developed countries, corruption doesn't affect the quality of life for the general population. But in India (and also in a great many developing nations), it does by hampering the construction and maintenance of infrastructure such as roads, bridges, public transportation, telecommunication, power and schools.

The dilapidated state of infrastructure in India is not just due lack of resources.

As Larry Diamond, a senior fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institution who studied corruption in many developing nations, argued in a 2003 essay, a big reason that infrastructure remained abysmally substandard in those nations was a high prevalence of graft because of a lack of commitment to do public good on the part of the elected officials, the bureaucrats and the overall system itself.

Other reasons that he cited for the systemic corruption in developing countries include the absence of good governance, accountability, transparency and rule of law.

One doesn't need to have a PhD in Political Science or Sociology to realise that these are also the root causes of corruption in India.

Good governance has been conspicuous by its absence at every level since Independence, and even before. (In fact, Indian administrators inherited much of the corrupt practices from the British colonial administration).

Similarly, transparency and accountability are rare commodities in the Indian political system.

(However, it has to be noted that small progress has been made in both areas, lately. The Right To Information law, implemented a few years ago, is beginning to show some results. A handful of politicians and bureaucrats have been jailed during the past year for corruption, although that may have more to do with the public outcry, which followed the spectrum and the Commonwealth Games scandals.)

In his brilliant 2003 essay *Moving Out of Poverty: Growth and Freedom from the Bottom Up*, the only reference Diamond – one of the foremost contemporary experts on corruption and democracy – made to India was about the country's election commission, which was depicted in a rather positive way. Nonetheless, the nearly 10,000-word paper can be seen as a treatise on corruption in India.

Few would argue that India of 2011 doesn't fit the Stanford scholar's definition of an 'archetypical badly governed' and 'endemically corrupt' country.

And this is how he illustrated the basic characteristics of such a country: Corruption is endemic throughout the system of government at every level. Everywhere, development promise is sapped by corruption.

Public infrastructure decays or is never built because the resources from the relevant ministries are diverted to private ends. Decisions on public expenditures are tilted toward unproductive investments – sophisticated weapons, white-elephant construction projects – that can deliver large kickbacks to the civilian officials and military officers who award them.

But the good news for India is Hazare's campaign has put corruption at the front and centre of the country's political debate. For the first time, it has roped in the common man – despaired, anguished and unable to speak against it until now – to fight against graft.

The Indian masses may have tolerated corruption all these years, but they signalled that it's not business as usual any more.

The sweeping changes that Hazare and his supporters are advocating might not be realised in the short run, but there is no question that they have won half the battle by making corruption part of the national discourse.

