

The ugly truth

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Satyawadi Raja Harishchandra is said to have given up his kingdom and sold himself, wife and son to keep his word given in a dream to Maharishi Vishvamitra. The story, when told to children today, would come with a footnote, much like the statutory warning with dangerous stunts: 'Do not attempt'. Even then, if a child grows up with such idealism, the world will wean them off it, pronto. "Are you Satyawadi Harishchnadra?" people will mock.

My friend bought medicines and the pharmacist asked if she wants a receipt, making it seem like a big effort that she would put him through in asking for one. She declined. When I questioned her, she replied, "There are bigger fish out there that are selling this

country for crores. I don't mind if a small merchant like him makes a few hundreds. He too has to put his kids through school and college!"

Same thing happens at the spa every time. They let me know that I am being 'mean' in asking for a receipt. Most patrons let it go for better services that would come from the favour returned. While these 'small fish' are evading 'big' tax, we are their accomplices. We're doing it because others, in other ways, do it for us — that's how smoothly, soundlessly the cycle of wrong moves.

Norm syndrome

Are we getting sucked into the web of corruption unwillingly, or have we willingly let go of our compunctions? Why are we giving in?

"When it comes to morals and principles, a man in the 'real' world has two options; compromise, or wait for some time and then compromise." (Mohammad Rafiq Teli)

Sarita took up a job at a private school that promised a monthly salary of Rs 20,000. On salary day, she was handed half the amount and asked to sign on a receipt for the full amount. Sarita needed the job badly. If she protested, she would be asked to go. Also, would it be better anywhere else? She signed and kept quiet.

Manoj's joy knew no bounds when he finally got the job of a physiotherapist in a government hospital. A government job meant stability and benefits like a retirement pension. When he went to collect his salary, the clerk refused to sanction it till Manoj gave him his 'cut'. Manoj resisted and did not take his salary for three months. Colleagues laughed at him and advised him to pay the clerk. They told him it was the norm and there was no point resisting it. After three months, Manoj relented.

When did we start giving in to the corruption 'norm'? When did we stop questioning our actions? When did wrong stop weighing us down?

Pavan K Varma, in his book Chanakya's New Manifesto, articulates it succinctly, "They (Indians) consider it bad when they have to bribe when they don't want to; they consider it good if the bribe gets them what they want. In this sense, corruption is like litmus paper; it takes the colour of the specific experience. The immorality associated with it is subsumed by an ingrained inclination to be worldly-wise. The world is not inherently fair; ...the end is more important than the means."

This is the crux of it — the end. Should we not let our child study in a reputed school just because the school will not give receipt for the humongous amount they charge as development fee? We are confronted with such dilemma at every step — a professional degree seat, a job, a tender or a plot allotment. In principle, it is wrong to take or give money without accounting for it. But, is it worth it, we ask. Two things allay our disquiet: first, everyone does it, and second, there is no option.

Corruption in high places

How did everyone begin doing it? What has made us corruption-resistant? Does corruption in higher places make us unscrupulous?

Sadly, it has become a government/authorities versus people scenario. The government of, by and for the people is now perceived as the government against the people. Political clout and money power have created a new Raj. When politicians indulge in corruption, it spurs public servants too to unhesitatingly pinch their share and we who depend on their integrity for our welfare, feel cheated. When we come to know that the government indulges in corruption, we want to steal too. Stealing from the thief seems justified. The values crumble top down.

When the government, leadership, law and justice machinery fail us, we see that the government is not just apathetic towards us but also self-serving, we have no compunctions in securing ourselves with money that brings power, whatever the means. Our leaders do it. They usurped flats meant for war widows; it is believed that in the state of Bihar, more than 80 per cent of the subsidised food aid to poor is stolen by corrupt officials. When the corrupt go unpunished, is it wise to go through the trials of living by principles, we wonder.

Power and money can absolve a person even from crimes in this country. The ones on the right side of law may have everything going wrong for them. Everything is in short supply because everyone wants more than they need. Amassing wealth becomes our security net. In a country of fallen public morals, where one can be wrongly implicated in an offence or crime, when no rule or law of country can save us, money may.

Mumbai's Campa Cola Society demolition is a case in point. The construction was illegal and needed to be demolished as per law. It was supposed to set an example; to serve as a deterrent for those that think they can get away with unlawful means. But it seems grossly unjust that only one of the parties involved was punished — the flat owners. Nary was a finger pointed at the key offenders — the builders and the BMC. Money and power saved them.

Who cares?

Among the worst fire tragedies in India was the Uphaar Cinema fire of June 13, 1997 in which 59 people inside a movie theatre in Delhi died of suffocation. Fourteen years before the fire accident, in 1983, the Deputy Commissioner of Police (Licensing) had inspected Uphaar, had listed 10 serious violations, and cancelled its licence. Yet, it continued to run in a country of palm-greasing, leading to the horrific tragedy.

The price of life against that of commerce is insignificant. The negligence of the Union Carbide of India, that led to the world's worst industrial disaster in Bhopal, or the loss of young lives in the dam water release in Himachal — every tragedy is an accident that could have been prevented; should have been prevented.

Human life is the cheapest in a country of one-billion-plus people where the perpetrators of accidents can clean their hands with money. People guilty of heinous crimes roam free and a completely innocent person can spend his entire life behind bars awaiting trial. It is believed that an astounding number of prisoners awaiting trial have already been imprisoned longer than the most rigorous sentence that they could have been given for the offence they are alleged to have committed. When everything is so uncertain, wealth and power are the only certitude; the only safeguard. Is being virtuous, wise?

Class consciousness

I had been waiting a long time for my turn at a business centre. A poor man, very awkward, with a printed document in his hand, was before me. When the service attendants got free, they asked for my job, completely ignoring the man before me. This is how our society treats those with less resources.

Being intrinsically a class-conscious society, we judge people by their financial standing; their standard of living. Success is weighed in terms of power and wealth. Frugal, simple living by principles is made fun of. The entire value system has changed.

Social boycott, much less a social frowning-upon, has been dumped. People worry about loss of wealth, not of face. The three Indian cricketers who were arrested for spot-fixing during the IPL 6, lured by easy money, did not stop to think of the shame they brought to themselves, the game, or their country. But the more astounding fact is that they continue to be invited to TV shows and their personal events being covered by the media. The threshold of shame has never been lower.

Professions considered noble, that of doctors and teachers who save lives and mould those of the future generations, command little respect in our society today. Doctors and teachers too have stooped to disgraceful practices along with the general lowering of public morals. All professions have eventually become jobs.

Fighting a losing battle

Are those that stand up for their principles fighting a losing battle? Don't the examples of those that suffer outnumber those that win? Again and again, we are forced to ask ourselves, what did they get?

Shanmugam Manjunath was brutally murdered because he ordered the sealing of two petrol pumps for selling adulterated fuel at Lakhimpur Kheri district of Uttar Pradesh.

Satyendra Dubey was killed in Gaya, Bihar for trying to expose the corruption in the Golden Quadrilateral highway construction project. RTI activist Satish Shetty was murdered in Pune for using RTI to expose land scams. IPS officer Narendra Kumar was mowed down by a tractor-trolley laden with illegally-mined stone that he was trying to stop in Morena, Madhya Pradesh. Additional District Magistrate of Nashik, Yeshwant Sonwane, was burnt to death by members of the oil mafia when he caught them on camera pilfering kerosene from a tanker.

Because this list goes on endlessly, we know they died in vain. The circle of corruption that they tried to break could not be broken. Corruption won, honesty failed. This country does not accord respect due to its brave hearts. The wreath-laying, compensation-paying, medal-instituting remains empty tokenism when the work they tried to accomplish remains unfulfilled.

Similar apathy disgraces the sacrifice of the martyrs of this country. It was a sad day when Col Vasanth's wife came on national television after seven years of his martyrdom to tell the nation how she has been denied her entitlements. She recounted how her husband

would allay her fears for his life saying that the country would take care of the family. Col Vasanth laid down his life preventing heavily armed infiltrators from crossing the Indian border at Uri, Jammu and Kashmir. He was awarded the Ashok Chakra posthumously.

Recently, the nation commemorated 15 years of the Kargil war by paying homage to the martyrs. Yet, the lingering memory of the day for most of us will be the plight of Major D P Singh who, having lost both his legs in the war, is fighting for his dignity, living on a paltry sum because the bureaucracy refuses to clear his dues in 15 years. These are not stray stories.

The State does not safeguard the interests of sportspersons that bring glory to the country. Athletes of yesteryears, who walked proud under the Indian flag and won laurels for the country, live in penury. A recent example is of 15-year-old Sita Sahu, a mentally challenged teenager from Rewa, Madhya Pradesh who won two bronze medals at the 2011 Athens Special Olympics, who is today forced to sell street food because the State did not honour its promise of financial help, which also stalled her career as an athlete.

Why do we need new laws to make people do their jobs? A Whistle-blowers Protection Act of 2011 had to be passed in May 2014 to protect those who stand by their principles and will not succumb to the pressures of the corrupt. And to encourage public authorities to deliver services timely and effectively, the Karnataka Sakala Services (Amendment) Bill, 2014 was passed by the state of Karnataka. It initiates disciplinary action against officials for failure to act in a stipulated time and recovers compensatory cost from guilty officers. The overwhelming question is how did we reach such a nadir in corruption? How will laws darn the threadbare moral fabric of a nation?

There are options

Acting from principle instead of self-interest is a challenge in these times. But a lot of the afflictions of today's life can be side-stepped if we base our decisions on principles, from our basic moral core.

The organisation, I Paid a Bribe, offers some practical ways of how one can avoid paying a bribe. The first thing we can do when dealing with a government department is to equip ourselves with information — scour their website, especially the FAQs, and the citizen's charter; talk assertively, do not be submissive; give all applications in prescribed forms and obtain acknowledgements for each; make it very clear that you would not pay any money for which a receipt cannot be not given.

Additionally, ask for the names of officials handing your files, or those who are 'sitting' on it. Ask for the time needed for the action according to their rule books. Maintain copies and records of the entire process and mention at each step all that has already been done, with dates. The idea is to be on top of things.

As important as it is to not allow the web of corruption enmesh us, it is imperative to break the cycle. It just takes a strong will and determination to stand up on the side of principles when confronted with the option. Remember Henry Clay's words, "Sir, I would rather be right than to be President." We have to lose some to win big in the long run.