

Inculcating ethics

Combating corruption and ensuring ethical governance require systemic reforms, greater transparency, and a renewed focus on societal values to uphold public trust



FR. JOHN FELIX RAJ & PRABHAT KUMAR DATTA

Public power is vested in the state, and the state exercises its power through a vast network of institutions and offices responsible for discharging various state responsibilities. The holder of a public office is a trustee of the public power attached to that office. Therefore, public officials are required to uphold and demonstrate in their actions ethical values such as high standards of conduct, spirit de corps, self-sacrifice, public duty, and general concern for the social good.

In a democratic system, the idea of ethics in public life encompasses not only politicians and civil servants but also the whole body of citizens bound together and inspired by purposes and common ends. Public officials have to embody in themselves not only moral qualities but also moral attitudes. These two values play an important role in strengthening legitimacy and promoting effective governance. Public leaders have to practice these values.

The Gita says that whatever deed is done by the Shrestha people in public offices, the community follows. Thus, the public officials have to shoulder a heavy moral load. Acharya Kriplani reminded the members of the Constituent Assembly set up for framing the new constitution of India, "We have enunciated not merely legal, constitutional and formal principles, but moral principles, and moral principles have got to be lived in life... to ensure the success of the Constitution."

In this context, the concept of administrative theology, where the focus is on service to others, self-sacrifice, particularly to the community at large, assumes special relevance. The key principles guiding public officials include selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty, and leadership. These principles are essential for promoting transparency, accountability, and good governance. The importance of ethics in public life cannot be overstated. It is crucial for building trust between citizens and the government, promoting accountability, and ensuring that power is exercised in a responsible and transparent manner. By upholding ethical values, public officials can demonstrate their commitment to serving the public interest and



India's score on Corruption Perception Index dropped to 39 in 2023 from 40 a year ago

promoting the common good.

Corruption is a pervasive issue in India, affecting various aspects of the economy, society, and polity. The alarming erosion of moral values due to the misuse of public power for private benefit has adversely impacted 82 per cent of respondents, according to the India Corruption Research Report 2023. This is further corroborated by the Corruption Perception Index, which shows that India's score dropped to 39 in 2023 from 40 a year ago, indicating an increase in corruption. The effects of corruption are far-reaching, damaging the country's image internationally and leading to lost overseas opportunities. Corruption also undermines trust in institutions, perpetuates inequality, and hinders economic growth.

The most common forms of corruption in India include bribery, nepotism, and patronage. These practices are not new and have been prevalent in various forms throughout history, including in ancient civilizations such as Egypt, Babylon, and Jewish society. To combat corruption, it is essential to address its root causes, including excessive regulations, complicated tax and licensing systems, and discretionary powers. Strengthening institutions, promoting transparency, and ensuring accountability are critical steps towards reducing corruption.

In recent years, India has witnessed significant anti-corruption movements, leading to changes in the political landscape. The emergence of new political parties, such as the Aam Admi Party, and the decline of traditional parties, like the Indian National Congress, reflect the growing demand for accountability and transparency. The government

has also taken steps to address corruption, including the demonetization of high-value currency notes in 2016. However, more needs to be done to tackle the deep-seated issues of corruption and promote a culture of integrity and transparency.

The issue of corruption in India is deeply ingrained, with historical roots dating back to the Saptanga theory of state conceptualized by Chanakya, which mentions the embezzlement of public funds by government officials. During the British Rule, corruption was rampant, with even high-ranking British officials accepting bribes. The British rulers institutionalized a culture of graft through the Official Secrets Act of 1923. After India gained independence, the License Permit Raj system perpetuated this culture of corruption until the 1990s. Although the paradigmatic shift in policy in the 1990s brought an end to this system, corrupt practices continued in different forms, as evident in the coal blocks and 2G spectrum scams.

The liberalization of the Indian economy has not been accompanied by corresponding political and administrative reforms, nor has there been a significant change in values. As a result, public officials continue to wield significant power without adequate accountability, creating an environment conducive to corruption. Political corruption and incompetence further facilitate this process. The Right to Information Act, intended to promote accountability, has failed to meet expectations due to legal loopholes and the lack of empowerment of citizens. Decentralized structures of governance, established through constitutional

amendments, aim to promote accountability and participation. However, the lack of effective governmental will to strengthen these processes has hindered their effectiveness.

Social audit, a part of public policy, also faces challenges. Empirical studies have highlighted the need for bottom-up pressure and empowered citizens to drive the decentralization process. However, these elements are currently lacking, undermining the effectiveness of decentralization efforts. India has indeed been actively working to combat corruption since 1963, with several key milestones and institutions established to tackle this issue. The Santhanam Committee's report led to the creation of the Central Vigilance Commission (CVC) as the apex anti-corruption body. The first Lokayukta office was set up in 1966, with state-level offices following suit. The Comptroller and Auditor General of India was established in 1971 to ensure accountability and transparency in government finances.

A significant addition to India's anti-corruption efforts is the Right to Information (RTI) Act of 2005. This legislation empowers citizens to request information about government activities, promoting transparency and accountability. The RTI Act has been instrumental in exposing several high-profile scams, including the Adarsh Housing scandal and the Commonwealth Games corruption case.

However, despite these efforts, corruption remains a pervasive issue in India. The lack of genuine governmental will to tackle corruption has hindered progress, with administrative changes and constitutional amendments curtailing the powers of the Chief Information Commissioner. The transparency movement has lost momentum, and the scope of RTI applications has been reduced.

To strengthen India's anti-corruption framework, experts recommend amending the Constitution to explicitly address corruption and designate it as a fundamental duty of the state and a fundamental right against corruption. Additionally, strengthening the Lokpal and Lokayuktas, reforming election laws to prevent politicians with corrupt track records from contesting

elections, and establishing special fast-track courts to expedite corruption cases are crucial steps towards creating a more transparent and accountable governance system. By implementing these measures, India can revitalize its anti-corruption efforts and promote a culture of transparency and accountability.

Corruption in India is a deeply entrenched issue that requires a multifaceted approach to combat. Despite the existence of institutional fighters, such as the Central Vigilance Commission and Lokpal, corruption persists due to various factors, including weak institutions and lack of effective enforcement mechanisms. The issue is further complicated by the fact that large-scale and top-level corruption often receives media attention, while street-level corruption, which affects the masses, remains unnoticed and unattended. Digitization of public services has emerged as a positive trend, but it is insufficient to act as an effective check on corruption.

To effectively tackle corruption, there is a need to reform old laws and restructure the criminal justice system. The current practice of allowing opaque electoral bonds is a significant concern, as it perpetuates corruption in key sectors of the economy and society. Moreover, the erosion of moral values, exacerbated by the rise of liberalization and consumerist culture, necessitates a new process of socialization. This can begin in families and mature through educational institutions, with a focus on inculcating values that promote integrity and transparency.

Ultimately, a multipronged approach is required to combat corruption, involving reforms in laws and institutions, increased transparency and accountability, and a renewed focus on socialization and value-based education. Only then can India hope to emerge as a leading global power in this century.

Fr. John Felix Raj is the Vice Chancellor of St. Xavier's University, Kolkata and Prabhat Kumar Datta is the Adjunct Professor of Political Science and Public Administration at Xavier Law School, St. Xavier's University, Kolkata. Views expressed are personal

In a democratic system, the idea of ethics in public life encompasses not only politicians and civil servants but also the whole body of citizens bound together and inspired by purposes and common ends