

How corruption subverts the system It is like the poisoning of the village well

Rajesh Kochhar

EVERY time a corruption scandal breaks out we exclaim: This is the limit. Very soon, however, we find that our acceptance levels have arisen and the next scandal touches a new low.

We can distinguish between three phases in post-Independence corruption. Phase I was characterised by extraction of money from the system as a corollary of development. A mild illustration of this phase is provided by the modifications wrought in the original masterplan of Chandigarh to yield the extant layout of Neelam-cinema row of shops-cum-offices in Sector 17. A morally dubious though legal "trick" from this phase is worth recording. In the 1960s when Beas-Sutlej link was being planned, a road had to be laid from the administrative office to the work site. The road was deliberately made a kilometre longer so that the staff could become entitled to travelling and daily allowances. Phase I soon made way for phase II in which corruption has become a substitute for development.

Phase III, ushered in by the Punjab Public Service Commission scam, seeks to reserve future earnings exclusively for the scions of those who have benefited from phases I and II. Punjab has a well-earned reputation for being a prosperous state. It is a measure of this prosperity that a crore of rupees in cash has been locked up in the treasury as court evidence. Punjab, indeed has come a long way from the time when court evidence comprised a 10 or a 100- rupee note. It is astonishing that while universities, colleges, hospitals, etc are languishing for want of one or two crore, an individual's bank lockers can yield as much as 10 crore.

The magnitude of corruption, its brazenness, the demeaning of the whole society that it entails, and its far-reaching ill effects all make it imperative that the issue be addressed squarely. The 100 crores guesstimated to be involved in the Punjab Public Service Commission scam seem to be ill-gotten twice over. It is unlikely that the moneys paid to the Chairman as bribe were borrowed from the provident fund or raised by selling inherited property. Much of this money must have been collected as bribes in the first place. Thus we have here the white money distributed among a large number of people being converted into black money in the hands of a few. The white money if left with their rightful owners would have by and large constituted their savings and become available for development of the state. As black money, the amount gets locked up in bank lockers and property, gets squandered on lifestyle, and/or leaves the country. The purpose of money is to generate more money. This is possible only if the money remains in the hands of its rightful owners. Thus corruption is manifestly anti-development.

There is yet another aspect of the PPSC scam that is far more pernicious. It slams the door of opportunity on the face of meritorious young men and women. The greatest asset of a society is the innocence of its youth and their trust in the fairness of the system. The great strength of India as a nation arises from the fact that the catchment area for its middle class is truly vast. Any attempt to restrict this catchment area must be viewed with disquiet. Brazenly excluding non-paying but

otherwise deserving candidates from the pay perks and prestige of upper-level government jobs brings governance into disrepute, promotes bitterness and cynicism among the youth, makes them anti-establishment, and in extreme cases may drive them to seek their fortunes through undesirable means.

A large number of young men and women from across the country leave their homes for Mumbai to seek their fortune in Hindi films. Most of them end as extras, waiters, cleaners or worse. It is only a rare few who achieve name, fame and glamour. Although the success rate is statistically very small, it keeps the hopes of a very large number alive.

State civil services examination is an important part of a state's life. Success in it inspires and gives hope to not only the candidates but also their families, friends and even observers. Any attempt to subvert the process, especially by those who are expected to strengthen it, must be resisted. If a capable young person is offered a government job on merit, he will be grateful to the system for its fairness, and will, hopefully, seek to strengthen it. On the other hand if an incompetent person is installed in office for extraneous reasons, he will only have contempt for the system which he will belittle further.

An uncharismatic son launched by a filmstar would be bundled out; an incompetent youngster sponsored by an underworld don will be shot; a nincompoop launched by a politician will be flattened at the polls; while the unpromising progeny of a businessman will be impoverished. But, if the public service commission selects an unworthy, the government will have to protect, maintain, and support him for ever.

Of the various kinds of corruption, the worst is the one that subverts the system. Stealing a bucket of water from the village well would be objectionable, but poisoning the well in the process would be unforgivable. Campaign against corruption, the more so in the selection for government jobs, should not be viewed as a partisan act or as some sort of a clever move on the political chessboard. Rather, it should be seen and supported as a national movement on the lines of campaign against smallpox or polio.