

Fighting Political Corruption

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A common problem all South Asians have faced for more than half-a-century is how to bring corrupt and irresponsible politicians to book. The problem has proved persistent despite differences in degrees of democratisation of our societies and the divergent political conventions we follow.

One solution the public has devised is to give our elections a plebiscitary character. We punish errant politicians by rejecting or voting them out. But this leaves a fundamental gap unaddressed — namely, the absence of a real choice based on clearly demarcated policies and programmes between our political parties.

Here, the media has sometimes played a helpful role in acting as the public's watchdog or whistle-blower and exposing our lawmakers' wrong-doing. In India, media representatives have over the past five years conducted 'sting' operations by posing as potential bribe-givers and catching politicians in the act of taking or agreeing to take bribes.

The first such big operation was the Tehelka cash-on-camera expose, staged in 2001 by a web portal, which has since turned into a weekly print magazine. Tehelka stung a number of politicians and their accomplices by sending people posing as defence contractors' agents looking for clinching or expediting deals, in particular for the purchase of night-vision glasses. Among those caught red-handed were the then Bharatiya Janata Party president Bangaru Laxman and officer-bears of Defence Minister George Fernandes's party.

Last fortnight, two television channels exposed 18 members of parliament. The Aaj Tak channel's 'Operation Duryodhana' showed 11 MPs accepting cash to raise parliament questions. And Star News did a "sting"-based story, which showed MPs accepting kickbacks for sanctioning funds from the Rs2 crores annually available under the MP Local Area Development Scheme (MPLADS).

MPLADS is meant to finance small capital works in an MP's constituency at his/her discretion. In reality, it has long been used to distribute illegitimate patronage. It was launched by Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao in 1993 with dubious motives — as part of a 'package' to buy support for his minority government, which included bribing MPs from a small regional party.

Cumulatively, Rs12,800 crores have been spent under MPLADS so far — a sum higher than the Union government's elementary education budget! It's widely believed that MPLADS funds are channelled to favoured contractors who will give kickbacks to MPs. Many fictitious, irrelevant, or me-too

projects have been sanctioned under the scheme.

It's tempting for MPs to exploit a scheme that's totally 'above board' to buy support from key groups. Some Northeastern states have also adopted similar schemes where each MLAs can spend/sanction a substantial Rs1 crore! This is a recipe for wasting public funds. Under India's Constitution, MPs have no executive power, which MPLADS illegitimately bestows upon them. The scheme should be scrapped.

The cash-for-questions scam corrodes an important democratic device, the parliament question. MPs can ask questions to extract official information and rationale behind government policies so they can scrutinise these. Even cynical government officials take parliament questions seriously because they can be punished for lying.

It's outrageous that MPs should ask parliament questions at the behest of vested interests, which want to embarrass their competitors or influence policy. The Indian pharmaceuticals industry has long been notorious for this. Even if a question is genuine, it's wrong to accept a bribe for asking it. If it's not authentic, the offence is doubly deplorable.

The two exposes highlight the need to make India's political system more participatory and accountable.

It's noteworthy that 6 of the 11 MPs caught in 'Operation Duryodhana' belong to the Bharatiya Janata Party, as do 4 of the 7 in MPLADS. This demolishes the BJP's claim to be a "party with a difference" — composed of people with integrity and convictions (however wrong). Over the years, the BJP's supposedly 'austere' political worker has been edged out by carpet-baggers, or bitten by the corruption bug himself. Four of the 7 BJP MPs trapped in 'Duryodhan' are RSS activists!

The sting exposes have generated anger, and strengthened the view that politicians are uniquely corrupt. Some reactions are clearly excessive. A small-sample opinion poll found that 76 per cent of people think the tainted MPs shouldn't only lose their seats. Forty-nine per cent think they should be barred from elections for life, and 26 per cent that they should be jailed. One percent would like to hang them! Two-thirds say less than 10 percent of politicians are 'honest'.

This expresses an upper-class anti-politics prejudice. Politicians are certainly no more corrupt than the businessmen who bribe them. Corruption is rampant in India. A Transparency International survey finds that Indians annually pay more than Rs21,000 crores in bribes to secure public services. Fully 80 per cent bribe the police — 14 per cent just to file a First Information Report and seven per cent to avoid false arrests!

Among India's most corrupt institutions are schools and hospitals. Schools alone make Rs4,000 crores in bribes.

The upper class can be extremely hypocritical about corruption. Take its remarkably hostile reaction to the current drive launched under court orders to demolish 18,000 blatantly illegal constructions in Delhi. These thieves of public space are protesting the demolition with almost righteous anger: had they not paid municipal officials Rs5 lakhs to start unauthorised building, and then Rs1 lakh a month during construction?

Such protests show the rich have internalised the culture of corruption. They have no right to condemn others for doing the same — and even less to single out politicians. Many politicians are corrupt but other groups are equally, if not more, so. The 'Duryodhana' MPs took a maximum of Rs1.1 lakh. But Indian businessmen have under- and over-invoiced exports and imports to transfer an estimated Rs90,000 crores to 450,000 crores abroad!

We should judge political leaders by strict criteria because they represent us. But other groups shouldn't be let off the hook. All holders of public office, and beneficiaries of government actions, must be accountable. That's a fundamental requirement of democracy. This means applying the rule of law universally and bringing the bureaucracy effectively within the ambit of the Right to Information Act, which India has just passed.

However, how do we make lawmakers accountable? Four measures are necessary. First, the sting operations warrant exemplary punishment, such as the tainted MPs' disqualification from elections for six years. This will help deter political wrong-doing.

Second, we must establish the right to recall MPs for incompetence or corruption. Third, our MPs or MNAs must evolve a code of conduct. This was first proposed in India in 1951, but fell through. It was revived in 1993, and led to the creation of Ethics Committees in Parliament's two Houses. Under the code, MPs must truthfully record their assets and interests, especially in government contracts. All their actions which have a bearing on policy or monetary gain should be scrutinised under the Right to Information Act.

Finally, there must be a focused effort to reverse the deterioration in the quality and duration of Parliamentary debate. Equally necessary is reform of ultra-conservative conventions which exempt government from debating policy and from seeking Parliamentary ratification for international agreements.

If things are to change, we must not stop at expressing anger with corruption. We must push for real, focused, reform.

P.S.

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* Praful Bidwai, a former newspaper editor, is a researcher and peace and

human-rights activist based in Delhi.