The necessity of corruption

SHIV VISVANATHAN

Dear Acharya Kripalani, I read your article on corruption in Seminar (No 8, April 1960). I was moved by its clarity, its integrity and its sense of history. Like you, I believe in an ethical universe. Like your generation, I believe character-building and nation-building go together. And yet, I find that a lot of what you wrote seems archaic. It also gets banalized when articulated as policy by ‘idiot’ bureaucrats and World Bank officials. Let me state my disagreement. Like you I want to fight corruption, but my sense of sociology is rather different.

Imagine you are a villager entering a city. You enter it and realize you have to survive. Even to live at subsistence, you need surplus. To sleep at night on the pavements, you have to pay the land sharks. To live you have to pay the policeman. You need a job quickly in a chai dhaba, at a railway station, at a construction site. To connect, you need a middleman. He makes survival possible. He teaches you the first literacy of a city. Only connect. Your first model of success is the clerk, cop and middleman. No wonder, you want to be like these magicians of the city extracting miraculous surplus out of nothing. You suddenly discover that the rules of the city are all wrong. Right is left. Up is down. You realize that the city is a strange classificatory system. Your intuitive sense of life won’t do. To enter, to survive, to subsist, to sustain, you need a map.

A city is a knowledge economy and many of its knowledges are not open. They are tacit, monopolized, secret, changing and manipulative. To enter modernity, development, urbanization, you need to know three things. First, that they are forms of knowledge; rule games. Second, to play these games you need access, entry, membership, which too are forms of knowledge. Third, a city is a classification; it’s full of lethal dualisms like formal and informal, white economy-black economy, official and unofficial. Success is an art of being on the right side of these.

Unfortunately, in terms of these taxonomies, you are by definition illegal, informal and unofficial. You also realize that citizenship is for the formal, legal and the official. You know you live beyond contract, in the crevices between the informal and the unofficial. Rights are a privilege for the abstract citizen. As a migrant, you are outside the law. Therefore, you are prey to the law. Every migrant is a potential victim in the Hobbesian system created by law. As squatter, poacher, hawker, scavenger, forager, as a creature without a ration card, you lack the first semblance of citizenship. Remember, all you are is a potential source of surplus. It is the poor who have to pay and that is the first rule of the extractive economy called the city.

What every entrant needs are rules of thumb, a sense of prohibitions of who to evade, avoid, who to beg from. These are the rules of coping and...
Corruption is the recognition of a dual city. It is based on the understanding that the social contract that ties modernity is between the official and the unofficial, the formal and the informal, the front-stage and the backstage of a city. The contract is not universal; it is not a charter of rights but a domain of negotiated possibilities. A modern city is a tragedy of taxonomies; the drama begins as you negotiate this world. The first axiom of knowledge is that the social is negotiable. You can be reclassified for the day, the hour. Behind such a rule game is uncertainty, a lack of insurance.

Survival as security comes from knowing someone, somebody. Sustainability comes from knowing who to pay. There is no central sovereign in the city. Every door has its leviathan, every street its tyrant. He commands absolute power over a limited domain. A nukkad could be a Gulag.

A nomad, a squatter, a hawker, a rickshaw-vallah realizes corruption is the knowledge of survival, the fundamental rules of coping and survival.

They realize that the city is not just a collection of rules games. It is an aggregation of rules called a bureaucracy. A municipal committee, a police station, a ration card shop are bureaucracies. All of them thrive on the informal sector. All bureaucracies are forms of exclusion that perpetually threaten openings, possibilities, entries and closure.

The squatter, the migrant is perpetually accessing or avoiding these bureaucracies. They demand two forms of payment. To pay because you are not a member. Second, to pay to be a member.

Corruption is not an identity tag, a label on an object or person. Corruption is that relation between official-unofficial, formal-informal, public-private that the city as architectonic creates. Corruption stems from taxonomy, the power to classify and declassify which is coded deeply into the city.

Ironically the classification has an enlightenment quality about it, a colour code, and a lovely ethnocentricity of colour that only modernity and enlightenment can produce. A city is free, or open, or understandable as rational design according to its visuality and transparency. So it is divided into a black and a white economy with a grey zone. A red light is equally accessible, equally barred. There is a front-stage visually open and a backstage visually obfuscated, barred and covered. Corruption is the world of grey and black. Corruption in official narratives needs to be exposed to light and revealed in reform narratives.

One has to understand that the social does not begin with gigantism of the state but with an enormous array of these micro-narratives of life. We
could summon an Erving Goffman from the other side of sociology to understand it.

Let us be clear that one is talking of two kinds of relationships. Let us christen the first the *Hummock*. It is an idea I borrowed from Gustavo Esteva. The hummock is the rubric for all relationships of conviviality between the poor, all their attempts to enrich life within the informal sector. Corruption can then refer to all rules, relationships between these entrants and the structures of modernity, development and urban life. Corruption is that ethnoscience, the rules of coping, the body language, the tacit knowledge that copes, confronts and domesticates the rules of state, the corporation, and the structures of modern life. It summons both the *middleman* and the *relative* as kinsman or casteman.

Corruption is the first great ethnoscience. Unfortunately, the word ethnoscience is used to refer to native systems of knowledge. I would instead use the word ethnoscience to refer to how the native as migrant, squatter, poacher, smuggler, copes with modernity. Corruption begins as anti- or contra-management science that combats the managerialism, the power and planning, the physical and symbolic threats of a city.

Corruption uses the language of the gift and the hummock to speak to modernity. It has at its centre the middleman as expertise. It is not accidental that he is the most reviled creature in the modernity saga.

What corruption as ethnoscience also does is that it sustains *agency* for the squatter, the migrant. He is not a helpless victim, an object acted upon. He has agency. This is important for this letter still hopes that it is not a dialogue with the deaf, that one day urban planning will begin with the hawker or squatter and build around him, understand his ethnoscience to re-liberate the city. Once we realize that corruption is a great management science, we can redo the city as a form of knowledge.

Corruption is not just a liberatory or coping exercise. There is equally a pathology, a bowdlerization that we must understand. Maybe we can call it the tragedy of the inverted commons.

The bureaucracy is converted to an enclosure. Every rule becomes a turf. Every file is a sovereign domain of a clerk, who as gatekeeper may or may not grant entry. Corruption recolonizes the grammar of a bureaucracy. A rational sequence of laws becomes a labyrinth. It is a process of strip-mining the state, or turning it into an extractive economy for personal ends. The bureaucracy becomes a collection of private domains, or public domains for private benefit. The tout and the middleman take over the system, thereby regrammatising it.

There are pluses or minuses to such an activity. The bureaucracy demands a literacy which an oral or ethnic community may not have. Corruption then becomes a form of reskilling, a travelogue, a catalogue of how to access the system – who to meet, what to give, how to converse, what to
ask and when. It becomes a package of performative rituals without which a bureaucracy is inaccessible.

There is something about the impersonality, the suffocating demand for expertise (filling forms) that people find alien. It is a confrontation of strangers without the rules of hospitality. It is contra-culture. People feel insecure about it. One is always asked if one has ‘contacts’ or an ‘approach to someone’. A presence inside domesticates and revives an alien place. 

*Rules give way to rituals.* You meet a *body*, a person, a relative, a friend of a friend. It almost becomes a home away from home. Nepotism gives one a sense of temporary *dwelling*, of being in touch with someone in control. Corruption, in this sense, recolonizes a bureaucracy. From impersonality, rationality and expertise, one moves to the conviviality of a patron-client relationship. It provides an umbilical guarantee, a sense of security, and a prospect of translation. A bureaucracy nepotised is truly in pidgin English a ‘service’ economy, playing on both meanings of the term. Corruption is a recognition that every economy is a knowledge economy by definition.

*Let me tell you it’s not just the poor tribal or migrant to a city who suffers the above syndrome.* I felt the same way when I was hunting for a house and settling down in America. I had a visiting professorship in Arizona at a delightful research centre for science policy. But settling down was a nightmare.

I walked all over examining third grade flats meant more for students doing postgraduate research, stumbling from pillar to post, getting nowhere, tired, helpless and clueless about where anything was. Yes, status back home helps. You are someone who knows someone who knows someone else. At the end of a tired day, all I could say was that I wished I could have bribed someone. A bribe is an act of problem solving even for those who want to do it the right way.

The Third World scenario would have been different. People would have dropped in, asked, offered information, rung up other people like gossipy worker ants. I didn’t want some colleague next door, some starched American asking me about my ‘significant other’ and promising a lunch whenever she turns up. I felt he was doing his Christian duty or reading me my rights.

I needed a car and a team to help me out. Impersonality and anonymity might spell freedom but sometimes what one needs is security or the guarantee of negotiability of concessions. A Third Worlder would have asked, ‘*Kuch contact hai?*’

Contact. It is actually a lovely Hindi word, which guarantees humans one can plug into, who electrify life. Corruption is a warm organism, a wonderful term from a *Hankyln Jankyln*, promising translations which guarantee movements across difference. One distorts the world, not only to subvert it but to seduce it to one’s own way of life. Words must be made life-giving before they freeze their initial openness.
Let us look at this other world as a normative process and understand it. The best way is to look at what are called the proverbs of corruption. I have assembled some of them.

* Everything is negotiable.

* Obstacles are created so that someone can solve them.

* Every rule is an opportunity. The more rules the better the opportunity.

* Each reform is an attempt to test a rule game.

* Never say Yes. Never say No either. A windfall of opportunity lies between them.

* Transparency is an illusion. Transparency International is a bigger illusion.

* Two things the liberal West won’t allow. An attack on property and a defence of corruption.

* Corruption is not about an open society. It is about openings in a society.

* Corruption is unsanctified expertise and therefore must be paid for twice, first as expertise and second for the lack of recognition.

* Corruption recognizes that delay is money, but too much delay is inflationary.

* Corruption does not demand that you be in power, merely that you know someone who is powerful.

* What a minister can do, so can his PA. Probably better.

* For a corrupt society, the labyrinth is paradise.

* I didn’t pay a bribe. I knew someone who knew someone.

* Corruption shows you that rules are constructed twice, once by the rule-giver, once by the man who applies the rules.

* Corruption is not about the rule of property; it is about rules as property.

Rather that seeing them as cynical statements, what one needs to do is to model them as a heuristics. Corruption must be mimicked and modelled as the basis of a new system. The boss, the tout, the pimp must be the triad around which the new system must be constructed.

Please don’t think I am being cynical. Corruption is a site which has to be seen as an imagination, a conspiracy of verb and noun plotting sentences and paragraphs. In fact, I often think of Kekule’s dream, of how the chemist is supposed to have dreamt the chemistry of the Benzene ring as a snake swallowing its own tail. The chemistry of corruption is slightly
different. It is an organism that uses reform as compost. Every reform recycles corruption in a renewed form. In fact, I was remembering two small anecdotes in this context.

I was once on TV with a World Bank expert who was advocating summer schools for bureaucrats about corruption. I laughed at the corruptibility of the idea and the expert was displeased. He contended people like me should not be on TV and I agreed.

Contrast this with a Bulgarian social scientist I met in Berlin. He came to me and said, ‘I loved your book’ (Foul Play: Chronicles of Corruption, 1947-97, Banyan Books, Delhi, 1998). I asked him, ‘How did you get it? It is an Indian edition and not easily available.’ He said, ‘I stole it from a library.’ And added, ‘Watching India, I understand Europe. Corruption is a form of entrepreneurship. We need to model it, build it into our institutions.’ It answers a need, creates a conviviality we must understand.

To fight it, we must simulate it, understand its heuristics of action. It is like recreating an ecology for a different purpose. We need the pragmatism of my Bulgarian friend.

Let me list out my sense of how to fight corruption. Understand the state first, understand that for people it is an obstacle course and for clerks, a labyrinth they must sustain. The state is the inverted commons, an availability of resources, skills that a society needs. As a rule game it is dense. The clerk and tout blunt the insensitivity of the bureaucracy, make it user friendly. What clerk and tout also make sure is that the state remains a labyrinth. You can call it Baroquization.

The social scientist, Mary Kaldor, talked of Baroque arsenals. She argued that every general fights that last war and the tank was the great weapon of World War II. Today’s generals want every weapon to look like a tank. So what was once a great weapon became unnecessarily complex, brittle, ornate and expensive. More and more was spent to achieve less and less. What we are confronting is two things. First, corruption is a response to felt need and second, the baroquization of the state by the corrupt.

To simplify, we have to fix the circuits of the state. To do that effectively we have to reset the taxonomies of the state. The dualism of formal and informal is lethal with the former policing the latter and creating an extractive economy. Two things are clear in a subsistence economy. Corruption is the tax the oral pays to the literate economy of the file and the contract, and it is the price of subsistence the informal pays the officialdom of the formal. We need to break this classification. It is not life affirming.

Look at the sites of the economy. To the opposition of formal and informal, we have horizon of the parallel economies of smuggling, aid, disasters, tourism, prohibition and terror. You can add defence to it for all practical purposes. The parallel economy and the informal economy are
service economies. They cover a huge part of the map where corruption is a way of life. To alter a way of life, you have to affect conceptions of that life and its livelihood. The clerk, the cop, the tout, the pimp, the prostitute are all sustained by us. We feel they deliver a service, possess modes of knowledge we do not have. Use the information revolution to challenge that fragment of the older knowledge society. Once you widen the hummock, simplify the rules of subsistence, you can challenge the construction of the state.

For most people the state is either what Shalini Randheria called a ‘cunning state’ pretending a guarantee of well-being, or a shamiana state which creates the trappings of governance around events like aid, disasters and doles. We need to pre-empt the corruption of states by restoring and returning work back to communities. Only communities can decentre a bureaucracy.

Begin by creating smaller corruptions, changing rule games in favour of the citizens. A computer giving all the dates in a court, a web-site announcing all exam results, a shop announcing all prices, development projects announcing dates of projects and a map of resources and benefits – all goes a long way. Corruption is the old information revolution that baroquized the state. Now one needs a new information revolution to redo the state, which then hands over problem solving to the community.

The community, especially women, as problem solvers can go a long way in re-weaving corruption. We talked of corruption as a subsistence cum migratory tactic. But there is also the corruption of corporations, defence departments and pharmaceutical companies. Treat that as criminal. It is a taxonomic problem again. A society has to know what to criminalize and decriminalize. Imagine an information department with the commitment of an NGO and the knowledge of a tout. And his enthusiasm. We can go far in reworking the state.

Once corruption is built in heuristically, treat the squatter, scavenger, the hawker as our prime citizens. Build cities around them after seeing how they build cities. It is a model of reciprocal problem solving which should be the basis of a new society.

There is nothing arcane to it. It is an older model of medicine. Instead of the iatrogeny (expert-induced illness) of allopathy which creates more of corruption, let us reset the logic of classification to fight contexts. We need a new connectivity to fight old definitions. Ethics is also an imagination and for too long we have either outsourced or hypothesized our imagination to the World Bank or Transparency International. By reworking corruption we can be the first society to move from subsistence to true sustainability.