Book Reviews

KALPANA KANNABIRAN, BETTINA HOLLSTEIN, FLORIAN HOFFMAN (Eds.), *Discourses on Corruption: Interdisciplinary and Intercultural Perspectives*, New Delhi, Sage | Spectrum, 2022, 308 pp., ₹795, ISBN 978-93-5479-015-7 (Paperback).

This edited volume shall compel its readers to interrogate the assemblages of 'formal-informal-illegal politics and economics' (p. 7) to understand the phenomenon of corruption. Corruption has assumed gargantuan proportions, as it now goes beyond monetary corruption to signify other issues ranging from everything that is wrong with governance to public policies that allow for the legal appropriation of natural resources by global corporate houses. Critical to understanding the political economy of corruption is the paradigm of 'collusive corruption' (Nayak, 2011), which the chapters in this volume explore in order to focus on the injustice and exploitation that corruption entails. The chapters present case studies from India, Brazil and Switzerland to understand corruption as a complex, shifting concept represented by 'diffused set of practices' (p. 2). The chapters use approaches from literature, ethnology, anthropology, economics, political science and law.

The volume's broad framework has been spelt out in the introductory chapter, which emphasises the need to interrogate the reductive understanding of corruption. Corruption is heterogeneous and hence its discourse is marked by polyphony. In this context, the shift proposed by civil society organisations such as Transparency International, with its focus on 'digestible quantitative macro-level accounts' rather than 'complex qualitative micro-level stories of corruption' (p. 3), signals the need to examine corruption beyond issues of bad governance and financial mismanagement and to understand the rise of 'new political actors, from anti-corruption parties, via the judiciary and to the people' (p. 2).

Upendra Baxi's chapter proposes an understanding of corruption that involves high profile political actors as 'systemic governance corruption'. He points out that legal cases related to well-known instances of corruption in India marked an understanding of corruption as a constitutional issue and gave rise to legal administrative law. Baxi also notes the culture of impunity and underscores the need to 'institutionalize effective procedures to fight corruption' (p. 42), and explores the role of anti-corruption campaigns and movements (which are rare in India, according to him) which constituted the counter-publics and marked the rise of a conscientious citizenry. Baxi additionally distinguishes between 'facts of corruption' and the folklore of corruption. His critical insight on the 'huge distance' between judicial discourse and its application is explored in Sujoy Dutta's chapter.

Sujoy Dutta draws from his extensive field work in Uttar Pradesh to investigate rural and urban households' awareness about the *Right to Information Act* (RTI Act) and their negotiations with the bureaucracy to secure their citizenship rights—in this instance, represented through their possession of Below Poverty Line (BPL) cards.[1] Dutta suggests that poor awareness about the RTI Act has resulted in the rise of 'incomplete citizens', a term that suggests the connection between structural violence and corruption (Gupta, 2012).

Combating corruption calls for measuring corruption to educate the public and to frame policies. Bettina Hollstein's chapter calls for the need to revise the indices for measuring corruption by including corruption concepts from a pragmatist economic ethics perspective to understand corruption by employing the term network-political action. She proposes three concepts and examines four indices from this perspective and contests the understanding of corruption solely in economic terms and suggests that measures to eradicate corruption will have to move beyond legal frameworks to incorporate education and training measures that will 'institutionalize anti-corruption values, procedures and incentives' (p. 34).

D. Narasimha Reddy deconstructs the grand narrative of demonetisation, which was projected as the panacea for eradicating corruption and unearthing black money.[2] He carefully analyses the politics of deception that validated the weapon of demonetisation in the post-truth era.[3] He notes that this politics of deception was a strategy to camouflage the real cause of corruption—the structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) and the attendant politics of the neo-liberal state and crony capitalism. The chapter offers an understanding of corruption at the interface of a neo-liberal regime and emerging political culture of 'authoritarian populism' (p. 115).

Sanam Roohi's chapter, based on ethnographic data collected between 2011 and 2019 from coastal Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, argues that the phenomenon of corruption has to be understood in the context of narratives of corruption. It provides an analysis of changing narratives of corruption and locates these narratives in the changing caste and class alliance of the region. The focus is on 'fluid narratives' and the narratives shift from agriculture distress in the region to development and politics of patronage. It thus provides a 'situated understanding' (p. 125) of the convergences and divergences between national and local versions of the corruption discourse.

The chapter by Janna Vogl seeks to understand the practices of petty corruption in women's activism in south India and challenges our understanding of the dynamics of petty corruption in this field. Based on ethnographic material and narrative interviews, it points out the disconnect between the official anti-corruption agenda of the non-government organisations (NGOs), which are sites of women's empowerment and emancipation, and the unofficial practice of offering bribes to lower-level officials. This chapter reveals that women from lower caste/class in the target groups of these NGOs claim their citizenship rights not by endorsing anti-corruption agenda, but through a tenacious negotiation with state officials to accept promised welfare state resources. It also outlines how NGO staff learn to bargain with the local state apparatus, emerge as brokers in the patronage system, and retain some part of the bribes given by women from target groups.

Kalpana Kannabiran's chapter explores the discourse on corruption in the literary archive of Indian literature spanning colonial and post-colonial period. It takes up six literary texts representing the interface between literary and legal representations to understand the changing contours of 'corruption scapes' (p. 249). Their narratives have been analysed as sites where tales of 'law, life and justice' (p. 245) are woven together. The narratives are marked by heteroglossia and an 'ironic double vision', and produce what Kannabiran, borrowing from Ranajit Guha, defines as 'insurgent reading' (p. 248). Also borrowing from Akhil Gupta's observation about the relationship between structural violence and corruption, this chapter offers a rich granular reading of the texts and shows how the literary imagination offers a radical social critique of corrupt realities that ravage the idea of justice.

Lucy Koechlin's chapter utilises a case study of a whistle blower in Switzerland who exposed the cartel of building constructors to underscore the prevalence of *Vetterliwirtschaft*—cronyism or nepotism—and to understand how this phenomenon functions as social capital and morphs into corruption in this country. The chapter deconstructs the neat binary between corrupt and non-corrupt states and societies. This helps us understand that the ambiguity in the discourse of corruption is related to the ambiguity of the labels that define the understanding of corruption. The chapter makes the interesting proposition that the discourses and imaginaries related to corruption, societies and nations are dynamic.

The chapter by Fernando Fontainha and Ananda Evelyn Cavalcanti de Lima examines the validity of judicial paradigms prevailing in Brazil for the past 30 years. It analyses the entire trail of important legal and political incidents, and observes that corruption redressal ought to move beyond punishment of possible culprits and take up the reform of institutions. It proposes three issues highlighted in the sociology of law for the reform of the discourse on justice, and offers a critique of the role of the judiciary in the process.

The chapter by Florian Hoffman continues with the issues of corruption and the anti-corruption discourse in Brazil, by taking up another important judicial trial. It offers a critique of the discourse of corruption prevailing in the Global South and suggests alternative frameworks. The dominant 'epistemic sense' of understanding anti-corruption discourse is located within the Weberian image of modernity. This understanding is then revealed as a failed attempt to contend with the multi-layered, hybrid complex fabric that defines the South. A framework based on the 'agenda of epistemic meridianization' (p. 227) is instead proposed to deconstruct the stratification of an 'epistemically privileged and normalized "us" and an observed "exotic other"' (p. 227). The chapter also suggests that the utilisation of Weberian concepts by the 'new developmental state' (p. 229) in the Global South results not in the structural curtailment of corruption but, paradoxically, in the destabilising of the political system, reduced political participation and the rise of the populist Far Right.

Finally, to conclude, this volume is a significant contribution to the evolving discourse on corruption/anti-corruption. It helps us understand the phenomenon of corruption across various sites, and the 'corruption complex' across abstract categories of state, politics, citizenship and violence.

Notes

1. Below Poverty Line (BPL) is an economic benchmark related to income/expenditure fixed by the Government of India from time to time to identify the financially weaker population in need of government aid. The parameters to identify the BPL sections of population differ across states and is different for urban and rural areas. The BPL card is a type of ration card issued under the Targeted Public Distribution System.
2. In late 2016, India's Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, announced demonetisation to fight corruption, inflation and black money. This notification saw the currency notes of Rs 500 and Rs 1000 denomination being banned. This drastic intervention affected the informal sector and micro, small and medium enterprises adversely.
3. Declaring 'post-truth' as the Oxford Word of the Year in 2016, the Oxford Languages group defined it as 'relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief'. Retrieved 23 July 2022, from https://languages.oup.com/word-of-the-year/2016/

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Putul Sathe
Associate Professor,
Research Centre for Women's Studies,
SNDT Women's University, Mumbai
putulsathe@yahoo.co.in

Zoya Hasan, *Ideology and Organization in Indian Politics: Polarization and the Growing Crisis of the Congress Party (2009–19)*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2022, x+205 pp., ₹1495, ISBN 978-0-19-286341-6 (Hardback).

Events in the real world provide background to the themes addressed in political scientist Zoya Hasan's latest book. As the Indian National Congress, seen to embody much of what is right and wrong in India's constitutional democracy, goes through the pangs of a leadership transition, a familiar dynamic is at work. The rank and file are restive due to the long spell in the political wilderness, disoriented by the onslaught from the political right. Dynastic leadership, now into its fourth generation, is seen as essential for the cohesion of the party, but also to stand in the way of fresh blood and innovative ideas. Unlike in earlier episodes of internal turmoil, when the Congress was thought to have a