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# Intriguing Issues in the Corruption Discourse and Challenges of Governance

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Corruption issues are dominating public discourse at least since the earlier part of the last decade. Yet the theorisation of the issue, public policy implications and political usage, especially in the era of post-truth, is hitherto studied inadequately. If one reason is the vastness of the issue that ranges from petty bribery to large multinational scams, the other surely is theoretical and methodological in nature. When broadly defined, corruption is commonly seen as the abuse of public power for private gains. It happens to be one of the most intriguing issues across the world, whether in mature or emerging democracies or hybrid autocratic regimes. Likewise, corruption and anti-corruption movements form much of what is known as public opinion in the recent past in countries like India and Brazil.

It is seen that corruption issues are quite widespread; consequently, anti-corruption is firmly intertwined with the global drive for good governance. The presence of corruption is often equated with a failure of public administration. While, broadly, the concept of abuse of public power is adopted by organisations such as Transparency International to define corruption and its perceptions, often the conceptual and contextual paradoxes are ignored. Such a definition primarily demands a contextual specificity because comprehending what is meant by “public power” and what are its “abuses” is not only case-specific but also at times confusing. At the field level, a descriptive definition is needed.

Perhaps the most precise description of corruption in a third-world scenario is given by Drèze and Sen (1996). They document (i) rent-seeking behaviour of

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Discourses on Corruption: Interdisciplinary and Intercultural Perspectives** edited by Kalpana Kannabiran, Bettina Hollstein and Florian Hoffmann, *New Delhi: Sage Spectrum Publications, 2022; pp xi + 289, ₹795.*

the leaders, (ii) absenteeism and poor performance, (iii) lack of trust and hence, lack of partnership between state and civil society, and finally (iv) the development of a culture of corruption within the public sector, as important dimensions of corruption. Existing literature dwells on the involvement of complex public-private relationships and “networks grown over prolonged periods of time” (p 2). It is seen that the existing literature deals less with certain fields like criminal justice, actors like corporations and broad structural issues like historical embeddedness in colonial, imperial and capitalist legacies. Furthermore, the impact of neo-liberal political and economic projects that give rise to paradoxes like the simultaneous promotion of shadow economy and public-sector reform is largely understudied.

This book does not attempt to fill such existing gaps in corruption research like addressing the structural issues or narrating corruption in sectors like criminal justice; instead, it aims at questioning the widely used corruption measuring tools and bringing much-needed contextual references in the studies of corruption by presenting cases that utilise, among the other rather unconventional methods like ethnography and designs like a case study. The book contains 10 essays apart from the introduction that deal with corruption in India, Brazil, and Switzerland. It covers vast arrays of issues ranging from conceptual tools such as

corruption indices and social capital and corruption interface, through contextually rich narratives from India, Brazil, and Switzerland to “corruption complex” in the literary imagination. Although, each of the articles is unrelated and often reiterative, especially in the conceptualisation of the issue of corruption itself. With an aim of contextualisation and problematisation of the entire discourses of corruption, the book can be read by dividing it into two halves. The first half deals with conceptual parameters and the second one with empirical and concrete practices. While the conceptual chapters directly question the existing methods of discourses on corruption, the empirical and concrete practices also carry the potential for different, often radically alternative interpretations.

### Conceptual Handicaps

It appears that despite having corruption indices like the Corruption Perceptions Index, Bribe Payers Index, Global Corruption Barometer, and one of the mechanisms of control of corruption, that is, Worldwide Governance Indicators from the perspectives of pragmatist economic ethics popularised by Transparency International, we are at a serious handicap in understanding and documenting corruption. Using the ideas of situativity of action, physicality of action and sociality of action, it becomes clear that there are severe limitations of existing measurements that can only be overcome by a more qualitative, culturally specific, contextually grounded designing of indices. Although the concept of corruption has been influencing the democratic systems, even changing the regimes, we are still way behind in terms of conceptualising corruption and developing specific indices. The Westernised models are inherently problematic and therefore inclusion of alternative and critical dimensions of corruption, namely emotions and other qualitative facets, becomes important.

Furthermore, the compartmentalisation of forms of corruption like grand and petty corruptions needs to be complemented by a continuity model

because they feed each other by forming an ecosystem of corruption. Such an ecosystem is often ignored and overlooked as corruption issues appear and disappear as and when politically feasible for the competing political forces to capitalise on them. This very nature of corruption perception brings out the important dimension of the contextual specificity of corruption. For example, while the retail and everyday form of corruption is often “disciplined” and taken for granted, large scams are attractive to the public sphere (Nath 2017).

### The Era of Post-truth and Anti-corruption as a Political Tool

While the book talks about the potentials of grand and petty corruption feeding each other, the perceptual difference between the two remains important in the public sphere. Petty corruption through disciplining not only becomes acceptable but often the tools designed to combat it, such as the Right to Information Act remain underutilised. Rather than seeking information regarding the pending cases of public service delivery, people choose to pay bribes as this expedites the process. Such disciplining and everydayness of corruption is not a feature of third-world nations like India alone.

The case study on Switzerland shows the strength of social capital in local cartels networked by friendships and kinship that feed corrupt practices but are not perceived as corruption. As they get contracts of most of the civic constructions and maintenance, people outside of the cartels can face severe “consequences” for their mere willingness to participate in the bidding process. Therefore, there is a tipping point of social capital becoming corruption even when it is not culturally recognised as such. This further reinforces the cultural specificity of the notion that escapes academic and operational definitions.

Although there is a degree of disciplining and acceptance in the petty and everyday corruptions, most frequently, bribery and large scams are seductive. Such seductiveness is systematically used in the recent past in the India Against Corruption (IAC) movement and later on during the demonetisation in India. While the root cause of the rising number of scams is

stemmed from neo-liberalism, it is never present in the public discourse. While it is well known that black money is actually a floating system and hardly stacked in cash and that business houses have devised innovative strategies to accumulate wealth through illicit means, the post-truth emotions channelised public sentiment towards demonetisation as a solution to the problems of corruption and black money. Despite its proven failure to meet any of the stated objectives, demonetisation continues to give Prime Minister Narendra Modi popularity as “someone who tried” and leaves a permanent mark on the previous regime as a corrupt one. Exercises such as demonetisation, no matter how economically failed, have helped the current regime in gaining further popularity through the moralisation of politics, infusion of emotion to public policy and setting up the ever-stronger us-versus-them narratives. The stage for this was set by the IAC movement launched by Anna Hazare and Arvind Kejriwal, and BJP with the help of post-truth emotions has reaped most of the political mileage out of it. Such a use of emotions has possibilities of democratic backsliding where individual interests are subverted in the name of national interest, state control over citizens, and finally a rejection of democracy.

Case studies from Brazil are indicative of the fact that charges of large-scale corruption carry the potential to dismantle existing regimes no matter how long it takes. The series of corruption charges against the Workers’ Party President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva since 2005 did not bring about an immediate power shift but resulted in the eventual dismantling of the party itself in the “Car Wash Operation” that led to Lula’s successor Dilma Rousseff’s impeachment. While in India we have witnessed a political change in the regime ending the decade-long United Progressive Alliance led by the Indian National Congress and no significant legal or political endeavour towards the recovery of black money or formation of Lokpal, in Brazil, the judiciary has effectively formed the moralisation of politics, most notably by Sergio Moro, the judge of the 13th Criminal Court of Curitiba. The importance of context even in delivering justice is brought

back as legal decisions in Brazil are seen as adaptive to the situations.

### In Conclusion

*Discourses on Corruption: Interdisciplinary and Intercultural Perspectives* is a timely addition to the existing literature on corruption. It does not rely on the widely used and almost clichéd conventional definition of corruption but delves deeper into the epistemological foundation of the definition itself. Theoretically, it questions existing metrics and empirically it brings in the much-needed rich contextual dimension of the issue. In doing so, it questions the neatly perceived boundaries between the formal and informal economic and extra-economic arrangements and demands a relook into existing conceptual tools such as perception of, participation in, and play of corruption. Instead of looking at the divisions like petty and grand, it invites scholars to look at the networks and nexus, where corruptions from different levels can feed each other. While the book breaks open and inspects the popular constructs such as advanced nations being corruption-free, looks into the dimensions of corruption in non-governmental organisations, and gender issues, a much more integrated development on each of the major themes is needed. The book ultimately lacks coherence in collating rather diverse forms of discourses. The conceptual apparatus, or the contextual issues emerging out of the case studies, demands further attention and refinement. While in part this is obvious given the novelty of the volume, however, further binding of each of the issues, maybe in a concluding chapter, would have given this volume a perfect ending. Despite these rather minor limitations, the book has the potential to open up newer domains for future research on corruption.

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