

Ethics and Administration

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In the 50th year of our independence, the declining ethical standards in government ride high on the national conscience. In the last few years the nation has been shocked by repeated revelations of scams and corruption in high places. There is also the recognition that what has been revealed is only a proverbial tip of the iceberg.

Despite the recent flurry of scandals, it would be wrong to think that corruption, even in high places, is a recent phenomenon. Indian bureaucracy, like most other bureaucracies, has always had its fair share of the corrupt. However, there is a perception today that the proportion of corrupt administrators has significantly increased over the years and that corruption has become much more rampant, and perhaps blatant, among the higher levels of administration.

There is, also, a new urgency in the matter. It is becoming obvious that we are at a significant cross roads in history. Corruption, like a computer virus, threatens to overwhelm the system. The corrupt are increasingly capturing positions of power and influence. They are then using their power and influence to marginalise those who do not share their greed for money and power. Like a computer virus, they are paralysing the systems and institutions meant to prevent and control corruption, and corrupting them. They are trying to ensure that the virus of corruption infects all new entrants into the system, and are seeking to prevent the entry of those who appear to be immune to this virus.

Even more dangerous is their attempt to alter social perceptions and values and to try and pose as the new social paradigms. Their money power and influence, coupled with the opulent lifestyles that their ill-gotten wealth permits, become a very seductive role model to others within the system or aspiring to join it. And, finally, their "success" in the eyes of the world makes the honest within and outside the system more and more cynical, till they give up and thereby remove the last resistance to a take-over by the corrupt.

History has shown us that the rule of the corrupt does not last forever. However, once it is established, it results in untold miseries for the poor and the innocent, and its overthrow takes an even more horrific toll. Where the rule of the corrupt has been allowed to weaken the basic fabric of society, the removal of one corrupt regime inevitably results in the installation of another.

The Indian Predicament

India certainly appears to be on the brink of a downward slide into such an abyss. Consider that in the last ten years there is hardly an institution in the country that has not been rocked by scandals. Former Prime Ministers, serving Chief Ministers and other senior politicians, of all major political parties, stand accused of serious crimes. Leading corporate houses are suspected of major illegalities. The largest of banks and financial institutions have been indicted in scams. Serious charges have been levelled against senior judges of the Supreme Court and judges and even Chief Justices of High Courts. The Punjab Police and other law maintenance forces stand accused of breaking the law with impunity. Senior serving and retired bureaucrats are shown to have committed serious improprieties, and worse. God-men and religious leaders are accused of corruption and rapaciousness. Even the Indian Cricket team has not escaped unscathed.

Though there are many accusations, condemnations, indictments and even prosecutions, the public remains sceptical, unable to believe that much will happen to the high and the mighty. A serving bureaucrat put it well when he said "earlier, if one was corrupt, one was scared. Today, one is scared if one is honest!"

To add to our woes, India is also being projected internationally as one of the ten most corrupt countries in the world (see table in annexed). Transparency International and Göttingen University, Germany, who bring out an annual Corruption Perception Index (CPI) state that:

“The CPI is a measure of lost development opportunities. According to a recent study by Professor Shang Jin Wei of the Harvard School of Government, based on the findings of the CPI 1996, a clear link has now been established between the level of corruption and foreign direct investment. The study shows that the difference in corruption levels from that of Singapore to that of Mexico is equivalent to raising the marginal tax rate by over twenty percent. A one percentage point increase in the marginal tax rate reduces inward foreign direct investment by about five percent.”¹

Though we might disagree with their definition of corruption and, perhaps justifiably, accuse them of a western bias, in our heart of hearts we know that the truth is not far from what their results reveal.

Even Indian surveys highlight the perception that Indians themselves consider corruption to be a major problem in their country. A recent India Today poll² reports that Corruption was ranked as the greatest evil in the country, above unemployment, rising prices, dowry, caste conflicts, and even law and order. When asked “how corrupt are Indians”, 41 percent said “very”, 40 percent said “somewhat” and only 8 percent said “not at all”.

Recent press reports suggest³ that the IMF has decided to deny loans to corrupt governments and governments not transparent in their functioning. Though this might be welcomed by some, it would be a humiliation for India if we were debarred for these reasons.

Ethical Crisis in the Civil Services

Though unethical behaviour has affected all sections and levels of our society, this paper focuses on the higher levels of bureaucracy, as perhaps it has done the most harm there. Nevertheless, much of what is true about the higher bureaucracy would also perhaps be true of other levels of bureaucracy, and of other institutions.

¹ Transparency International and Gottingen University Homepage, World Wide Web: <http://www.gwdg.de/~uwwv/faqs97.htm> – p1

² India Today, August 18, 1997, p47

³ “How IMF can unmake a Chidambaram”, Bharat Jhunjhunwala, Indian Express, 12 September, 1997

But what is the nature of the ethical crisis⁴. Perhaps the bulk of what is wrong in the system can be characterised by identifying four types of unethical behaviour.

The Corrupt

The first type of unethical behaviour is exemplified by the corrupt, whose primary purpose is to amass wealth and influence. They have no qualms about abandoning all ethical norms of behaviour and their only value is to look after themselves. The system's unwillingness or inability to restrain them fuels their audacity. They form alliances with others of their ilk, for it is difficult for them to operate alone, and service the corrupt among their bosses and masters, in turn getting protection and patronage. They also, in turn, get serviced by their subordinates and offer them protection and patronage.

They also work at isolating and marginalising the upright. Many of the corrupt are otherwise efficient and effective, and they use these abilities to appear indispensable to even their upright bosses. The fact that they are efficiently and without questions willing to carry out instructions often makes even honest superiors condone or ignore their corrupt habits.

These are clearly the most dangerous elements in the bureaucracy and it is imperative that individuals with such tendencies and potential should be scrupulously excluded from the civil services. Those who nevertheless slip through, or who are already there, have to be comprehensively dealt with

The Collaborators

There is another class of bureaucrats who might not themselves indulge in corrupt practices, especially not for personal gain, but who collaborate with the corrupt. These include those who, under pressure, might agree to do or allow to be done something that is wrong, but fastidiously refuse to personally accept any of the

⁴ Much of what follows has emerged through discussions with participants of various training programmes in IIPA and elsewhere. I am particularly indebted to the participants of the twenty second and twenty third Advanced Professional Programme in Public Administration (APPPA) at IIPA, and to officer trainees of the in various courses at the Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration, Mussoorie, for sharing their experiences and perceptions regarding ethics and administration. I gained much from these interactions.

gains or benefits. They also try use their ingenuity to act in a way such that they neither obstruct their corrupt superiors, nor can be held responsible for any misdeeds if the matter comes under scrutiny.

They are adept at finding a rule to suit a case, and experts at manipulating the system with least risk to themselves. They try and keep within the letter of the law but have no compunctions in sacrificing its spirit.

If challenged, they talk about being practical and worldly wise, or blame the system, the politicians, the electorate and everybody else.

Interestingly, they also see themselves as being very vulnerable. They argue that their bosses are very powerful, as are their subordinates. They believe their subordinates to have independent links with their bosses and an ability to paralyse the work of the department. Consequently, they consider any resistance to the nefarious activities of either as being ineffective and fraught with danger. Surprisingly, they do not see themselves as having the same powers, both as a boss and a subordinate, that they so readily recognise in their own bosses and subordinates.

In any case, by immunising themselves from the possible adverse consequences of being actually upright, they also become beneficiaries of the corruption they collaborate with. Their demand that honesty can only be expected if being honest involves no cost to them, is clearly illegitimate.

The Apathetic

There is also a class of apathetic officers who, though they refuse to participate in or condone corruption, are not willing to fight it. Very often such officers are erstwhile fighters who have been beaten down or become cynical. They withdraw into themselves and are often marginalised within the system. They sometimes take to other, non-administrative, pursuits, and try to revive their sagging spirits and sense of self worth by excelling in the arts, or as intellectuals or sports persons.

Their immorality lies in the fact that they continue to be public servants without serving the public. They do not directly

seek any benefits from their office except their salaries, their legitimate perks, and the freedom to do their own thing. But even in doing so, they take their due from the public, without in return giving the public its due.

The Lawless

There is another category of bureaucrats who subvert the system by acting as if they are above the law. In this category are men and women who arrogate to themselves the right to act extra legally in pursuing what they consider to be public interest.

The blindings in Bhagalpur, the illegal detention, torture and even extermination of suspects in Punjab, Kashmir, the North eastern states and other parts of the country are blatant examples of such tendencies. So are the so called 'third degree methods', which have been a part of police investigative methods for many years.

However, it is not just the police or the military and paramilitary forces who indulge in such acts. Even intelligence agencies, including revenue intelligence agencies, have been accused of illegally tapping phones, planting evidence, and indulging in various other illegal acts to "bring the guilty to book".

What makes such acts different from the sordid and mundane types of corruption described earlier is that the officers involved are not acting out of self interest but out of their perception of public interest, misguided though it might be. Such officers see themselves as saviours of a society which is being threatened by its own softness, sentimentality, preoccupation with fair play or, at best, a host of inappropriate laws. They also often convince sections of the public to see them as knights in shining armour. Recent pronouncements from some serving and retired officers of the Punjab Police, and the response from some segments of the public, are good examples of such a tendency.

However, if their arrogation of the right to act extra legally can be considered ethical, then the principles of natural justice require that such a right must be available to every individual. What, then, would be the plight of a society if every individual

was ethically free to break any law, whenever he or she so desired. Where, then, would be public interest, especially the interest of the poor and the oppressed, who are the most vulnerable to chaos and anarchy.

Besides, every individual interprets public interest differently. Hitler, for example, thought it in public interest, in fact in world interest, to exterminate the Jews. Others think it in public interest to exterminate people belonging to a particular religion, caste or even a socio-economic class. Perhaps because of this subjectivity, laws were codified in the first place to represent those actions and processes which, after considered debate, could be said to be universally in public interest. For example, it was after great thought that public interest was seen to be served if an individual was punished for a crime only after being convicted through a defined and due process of law. By opting to violate this law we are actually imposing our own subjective perception of public interest over the more universal notion of public interest, as determined by the society. Clearly, then, we cannot take refuge behind the notion of public interest itself.

Apart from the ethicality of such actions, even their impact on public interest is generally adverse. Such violations of law lower the respect for all laws, and often encourage or provoke people to progressively take the law into their own hands. It creates a situation where, even if the initial motive was public interest, the inhibition to be lawless erodes away and the law starts being broken for other, less noble, reasons. Besides, where individual administrators are willing to "fire fight" by using extra legal methods, they succeed in obfuscating the real issues and deprive the society of an opportunity and of the incentive to find more sustainable solutions to the more fundamental issues.

Even where exceptional conditions demand exceptional measures, there is nothing to prevent these exceptional measures from being found within the law. If need be, the laws can be strengthened or made more appropriate. Besides, short term "solutions" of basic social problems can never be in public interest. The costs that the society has to pay for these extra legal

interventions are always greater than those that would have been paid if a permanent solution had been allowed to evolve.

The Choices before the Nation

But are we a nation bereft of moral character? Can we not find among our nine hundred million people the few thousand who are both willing to govern and worthy of the responsibility of governance? Clearly we are not looking hard enough.

In some ways the fact that corruption has become a high profile issue is an advantage. The fact that we have a political dispensation, at the centre, which because of its tentative and minority character cannot easily brush aside such a politically volatile issue, is perhaps another advantage. And the presence, still, of a significant number of men and women of character, both inside and outside the government, and the fact that they have not yet become cynical and given up, is a further asset. But these advantages and assets must not be frittered away and a serious counter offensive against corruption and lawlessness must be launched without further delay.

The War against Corruption

Clearly any war against corruption must attack both systemic and individual issues. Systems must be changed so that they become inhospitable to the corrupt and supportive of the honest. However, changing systems is not enough, for ultimately these systems are set up and operated by individuals. Therefore, it is also important to ensure that the right types of individuals enter and remain in the government, and that these men and women of character are supportive and nourishing of each other and are united against the corrupt. In the final analysis, the individual is more important than the system, for it is easier for good individuals, if there are enough of them, to improve even a very bad system, but the converse is far more difficult.

Targeting the individual

There is an oft repeated cliché, often given as an alibi for corrupt bureaucracies, that a bureaucracy can be nothing more than an image of the society that it comes from. However, what this seemingly true generalisation hides is that as the bureaucracy is a small subset of a society it must represent the best of the society. This, of course, does not mean that all the best must join the bureaucracy, but that all in the bureaucracy must be from among the best. Are we really selecting from among the best?

Selecting the Bureaucrat

Civil servants, at various levels, are mainly selected through written examinations and an interview. The written examinations are expected to judge the candidate's grasp of academic disciplines and their ability to express themselves in writing. The interview is meant to assess the candidate's personality, verbal ability, general knowledge and perhaps analytical and retentive capacities. What is missing in all this is an assessment of the candidate's character.

Perhaps initially an independent assessment of the character of a candidate was not considered necessary. Aspirants to the civil service belonged to a certain strata of society and it was assumed that young men and women brought up in such homes would automatically have the values required of good civil servants. Breeding and the college one read in was a critical qualification, and perhaps many aspirants were at a disadvantage because they did not possess these, even though they were otherwise more than suitable.

It was also believed, at least by some, that an intelligent and well-read person must necessarily be a morally upright one. Also, it was believed that applicants to the civil services were too young to have a fully formed character, which could be appropriately moulded during the training period. Perhaps it was also not clearly understood how to assess the character and value systems of the candidates. All this might have been so a hundred years ago, but it is certainly not true today.

Of course, even today It can be argued that personality tests are not fool proof and a clever person can get around them.

Perhaps so, but then the test designed to judge the intelligence or scholarship of the candidates is also not fool proof. Yet, nobody will argue that they are worthless.

Such testing would not keep out all the undesirable elements, but it would certainly go a long way in reducing their number and, thereby, preventing the civil services from getting swamped by undesirable elements.

Changing the System

However, even if one progressively ensures that new entrants into the civil service are of the right sort, whether they remain the right sorts depends a great deal on their working conditions and environment. Young civil servants tell stories of how, from their first day in the job, they are relentlessly pressurised to compromise. The alternatives presented to them are stark: either co-operate and nothing untoward will happen to you, you might even benefit, or resist and you will be harassed and humiliated, without any respite. Colleagues and seniors advise them to be “practical” and “realistic” and not be difficult. They are told horror stories of what happened to people before them who were difficult. If they try and reassure themselves by thinking of some of the upright officers who made it to the top, they are derided and informed that those they think upright made their own compromises. Besides, those were different times, they are told, and what was possible then is no longer possible today.

With such relentless pressures, day after day, many break and then withdraw into an apathetic passivity, where they keep their self-respect by not personally benefiting from their compromises. Others join the bandwagon and are soon indistinguishable from the rest. The few who refuse to break are harassed and humiliated, and become demoralised. Into such a system even the noblest of souls would be hard pressed to survive. But what can be done to change this system?

The government constantly tries to strengthen the laws and institutions designed to control corruption and lawlessness. It creates new institutions and laws. The judiciary, the press, the NGOs and the common public have all stepped up their fight

against these evils. But the downward slide seems to continue, perhaps only a little slower for all the efforts.

Transparency

Sometimes the best solutions to social problems emerge from the society itself. This is what happened in Rajasthan where the villagers, fed up with corruption in the panchayat system, decided to do something about it. Under the banner of the *Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS)* they started demanding copies of bills, vouchers and muster rolls relating to expenditure incurred by the panchayats. Because of a sympathetic bureaucrat, the vouchers and muster rolls for a few village panchayats were made available to the villagers. The MKSS then organised *jan sunwaís* (public hearings) between December 1994 and April, 1995, where these muster rolls and vouchers were read out to the whole village. The results were startling. In village after village they discovered that many of the works that were supposed to have been undertaken in the village and for which vouchers existed, had in reality never been carried out. They also discovered that many of the names on the muster rolls were false, some even belonging to fictitious characters or to individuals long dead⁵.

The news of this experiment spread rapidly and more and more villagers started demanding access to bills, muster rolls and vouchers. There was, understandably, panic among the panchayat functionaries who protested and the Gram Sevaks of Ajmer District even went on strike. However, this only strengthened the resolve of the local people to demand and get a right of access, and a right to get photo copies of these records. The slogan they adopted was: *Hamare Paíse, Hamara Hisab* (our money, our accounts).

Finally, this mass expression of the people's will and petitions from the MKSS resulted in the Chief Minister of Rajasthan announcing on the floor of the Rajasthan Assembly, in April 1995, that he would issue necessary orders to provide the required

⁵ Much of the information on the Rajasthan experience has been gleaned from The Right to Know : The Right to Live, MKSS, 1996 (mimeo) and other letters and pamphlets of the MKSS.

information. Though there was jubilation among the people and the activists, the battle had not yet been won.

Despite the assurance of the Chief Minister on the floor of the House, the State government refused to issue the necessary orders and instructions.

The movement spread rapidly to neighboring areas, but as there was no response from the government the MKSS activists decided to organise a public dharna in the town of Beawar. The dharna started on 6 April, 1996 and was a success beyond everybody's expectations. Not only did hundreds of people participate but there was wide support from the press, from representatives of almost all political parties, from dignitaries within and outside Rajasthan, and most important from the common citizens. The citizens of Beawar and neighbouring areas not only contributed money and food to support those participating in the dharna, but also exhorted them, when occasionally their spirits flagged, not to give up the battle. It was clear that the demand for the right to information had captured the imagination of the masses.

After a month long sitting in Beawar, a simultaneous dharna was started in Jaipur and the State government was repeatedly petitioned to accept the people's demand for a right to information.

There were protracted negotiations between the activists and the government, with support from prominent personalities within and outside the state. The government finally issued a press statement reiterating its commitment to the CM's announcement and declaring a time frame within which it would give such an entitlement. It also set up a committee to go into the operational details related to the provision of the demanded right to information. This committee deliberated for two and a half months and then came out with a report which was itself kept secret.

As there was still no action by the government, the people once again decided to launch a movement and to have a dharna in Jaipur. This dharna, launched on 26 May, 1997 also

received widespread support from the people and coverage by the press. On July 15, 1997, nearly two months after the start of the dharna, the state government suddenly produced a notification, dated 30 December, 1996 conceding almost all the demands of the people. It was surprising that this six months old Gazette Notification granting the right to information was itself kept a secret for so long.

In light of the notification, the MKSS and their supporters raised the dharna and went back to the villages to start using this new found right. However, till the beginning of September, most of the district and panchayat offices had not yet received a copy of the 30 December notification and consequently expressed their inability to provide the required information to the people. The people are still struggling to get the bureaucracy informed about their right to information.

The Bilaspur Experience

Another significant step towards universal right to information took place in the Bilaspur division of Madhya Pradesh. Here, it was the bureaucracy, especially the Divisional Commissioner, who decided to provide to the people the right to information about the public distribution system and other government programmes. Instructions were issued on 2 October, 1996 that every individual would have a right to examine and get photocopies of the allotment and distribution registers in a ration shop. This, again, created a panic among the ration shop owners and independent observers confirm that, after a long time, there were adequate food grains and other ration items available in the PDS shops.

It also led to savings in the PDS, confirming that leakages were blocked. However, in the over one year that has passed since this order was issued, another type of problem has emerged. Perhaps because this right to information was not given as a consequence of mass public pressure, the people did not take cognisance of it. As a result, there has reportedly been very few demands for information in the last one year. Clearly, if the people do not use this right then its deterrent value, which

initially led to a spurt in the availability of grains in the PDS shops, will cease to be effective. Things will go back to what they were before the right was notified.

The lesson to be learnt from these two cases is that you need combined action between the people and the government. Where the people recognise the need for, and have a commitment to, using the right to information, you also need the bureaucracy to be sympathetic and willing to accommodate and even encourage the provision and exercise of such a right. Unfortunately, so far we have seen the reluctant bureaucracy in Rajasthan and the disinterested populus in Madhya Pradesh. But there is hope that lessons would be learnt and even in these two states the apathy of the public and of the bureaucracy would be broken down.

The Draft Right to Information Bill

At the national level, there does appear to be a concerted effort to provide a right to information. Motivated to some extent by the happenings in Rajasthan, a national campaign on the right to information was launched a little over a year ago. This campaign worked with other groups and an initial draft bill for the right to information was formulated. Subsequently, the Press Council of India formulated its own bill, using the earlier bill of the campaign as a base and involving members of the national campaign committee in the drafting work.

This bill was presented to the Government of India which, in turn, set-up its own committee to examine the bill. This committee has come up with a report and another draft bill (see documents in this volume) which, again, incorporates many of the suggestions made in the Press Council bill. These various draft bills are now being discussed across the country and recommendations for additions and amendments are being sent in to the Government of India.

The Government of India seems itself to be enthusiastic about presenting such a bill to Parliament. The Prime Minister of India has publicly declared his resolve to provide a right to information to the public. Reportedly, the issue has also received support from Chief Secretaries of various states and from various Ministries of

the Government of India. As could be expected, there are some differences of opinion within the government, and between the government and others. Some of the more important differences are listed below:

1. The government is inclined to keep notes on files, and papers and correspondence containing advice, opinions and recommendations, out of the purview of the bill. Many others feel that this should also be brought under the purview of the bill.
2. There is a debate on whether the right to information should only be vis-à-vis the government or whether a citizen should have such a right with regard to the corporate sector and other institutions outside the government, and this directly or through the government..
3. The government seems hesitant to provide for stringent punishment in case provisions of the proposed Bill are violated and an officer either refuses to provide information or provides false, misleading or incomplete information.
4. There is also a dispute regarding the institutional mechanisms that are required to actualise the right to information. There are, for example, misgivings about whether the consumer courts, as provided for in the government draft bill, are the right fora for hearing appeals under the Right to Information Act.
5. There are, of course, various views, both within the government and between the government and others, on what should be excluded from the purview of the bill and how this exclusion should be worded, so as not to be ambiguous.

It is hoped that the bill on the right to information would be ready to be presented to Parliament in the winter session of 1997. Whether this happens or not, the fact remains that perhaps for the first time since independence, elements within the government including those at the highest levels, and large numbers of people outside the government, are agreed on the need for such a right and are working together towards establishing it.

Systemic changes from within

Bureaucratic systems are notorious for closing ranks when attacked from outside. Many an aspiration of the people, including earlier efforts at gaining a right to information, has faltered in the face of united bureaucratic opposition.⁶ Therefore, it is important, if changes are to be brought about, that a part of the initiative comes from within the system.

A recent example of such an initiative is the move by the IAS Officers Association of Uttar Pradesh to identify for themselves, and among themselves, the corrupt. Much has been written about this in the press and there is little need to repeat the details there. Essentially, a group of IAS Officers in Uttar Pradesh, fed up of what they saw as corruption among their own kind, moved a resolution in their association demanding that the association identify, through an opinion poll the three most corrupt IAS Officers in Uttar Pradesh. Though there was huge opposition to this move, the association accepted this resolution and conducted an opinion poll. Reportedly, only a little over a hundred of the 500 plus IAS Officers of Uttar Pradesh participated in this poll. Though three officers were voted as the three most corrupt, none of them received over a hundred votes. In keeping with their decision that only if an officer gets over a hundred votes would his or her name be made public, the association sent these names under a sealed cover to the Chief Secretary of the State, with a request to initiate an enquiry.

Perhaps there can be a dispute about the efficacy and even the appropriateness of the strategy adopted by the Association to identify corrupt officers. Allegations have been made that the process was biased in terms of caste, seniority, or even on the basis of the popularity of the officers, irrespective of their ethical standards. Notwithstanding this, there was a general agreement that the officers so selected were generally thought to be corrupt.

⁶ Former Prime Minister, Shri V.P. Singh, stated in a seminar organised by the Press Council of India and in personal conversations, that this much touted electoral promise of his Government, in 1989-90, was never actualised because of bureaucratic resistance. According to him, despite sending a group of bureaucrats to various countries to study the law and procedures there, they continued to produce draft bills which in fact gave away nothing.

However, such a process is perhaps neither replicable elsewhere nor bears repetition. Efforts to pursue or repeat the same strategy would very likely bring in all the corrupt practices that are widely prevalent in other electoral processes. But, it cannot be denied that the initial impact of this resolution and the subsequent opinion poll was positive and significant. By all reports not only did it shake-up the IAS Officers in Uttar Pradesh, especially the corrupt ones, but it also brought a ray of hope to the honest officers within the system and to the long suffering public. Contrary to a common prediction, this exercise raised, rather than lowered, the credibility of the UP IAS Officers. Even before the poll it was common knowledge that many officers were corrupt, what was a pleasant surprise was that there were so many who were willing to fight the corrupt.

The major weakness in the opinion poll strategy is in the numbers game. It would perhaps have been a very good strategy if those willing to fight corruption outnumbered the corrupt. Unfortunately, such a scenario is rare today. Though it might be true that the number of officers who are technically honest outnumber the corrupt, of these technically honest officers, only a minority are willing to stick their necks out and fight against corruption. Therefore the battle becomes unequal, with the corrupt usually outnumbering those who are both honest and willing to fight. In such a scenario, the corrupt would soon combine and turn the tables on the honest, and ensure that no corrupt officer ever gets identified. In fact, it is not beyond the realms of possibility that they might get the honest elected as the corrupt, thereby further marginalising them.

The lesson that has to be learnt from this is that whereas it is desirable for bureaucracies to themselves fight against corruption, in most circumstances those who are both honest and committed are a minority. Given the wealth and influence that the corrupt officials acquire, it is difficult for the honest minority to by themselves achieve any significant results. Therefore, the time has come for honest and committed officers to reach out and join hands with right-minded people outside the government.

These may be journalists, activists, academics and other professionals, and through them, the general public. It is only where such alliances are formed that the combined power of the good has a chance of overwhelming the corrupt, especially without very heavy personal costs having to be paid by the upright.

Fortunately, in the past few years there has been a beginning of such alliances, initiated by retired and serving bureaucrats and by people outside the government. Such alliances are rapidly but quietly growing in size and have begun to provide a support system to individuals within the government who might feel isolated, confused or beleaguered. By their very nature, such alliances are far more effective if they are low profile and faceless. Some constraints exist because of the secrecy that prevails within the government and which makes the sharing of information often illegal and hazardous. However, once the right to information is established, the ability of such alliances to become effective would significantly increase.

Conclusion

This is perhaps our last chance, as a nation, to act decisively and stem the tide of corruption and lawlessness that threatens to engulf our nation. First, we need to make transparent the functioning of the government and of all other institutions impacting on public interest. The corrupt and the lawless must be exposed and not allowed to take cover behind government secrecy. Corruption must be made a high-risk activity, rather than the very secure pastime that it has become today. Secondly, upright and sensitive people within and outside the government must join hands to carry forward the fight against corruption and lawlessness. As we have seen, even a right to information serves little purpose unless people are willing to use this right for the betterment of society. Besides, the forces of corruption cannot be challenged, unless there is a combination of the opposition. Finally, we must safeguard our future and the future of the civil services by ensuring that those who enter into the civil services are not just clever but also upright and empathetic.

