

## **Forging a Public Movement**

### **Corruption: The Cancer in Our Society**

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It is a long while now when the first revelation came about Swiss Bank accounts where Indians had accumulated large amount of ill-acquired money, estimated at staggering 70 lakh crores of Rupees. Initial reaction from the government was disbelief and denials. It is a lot of money for a poor country like India to be robbed off or for that matter even for the United States to let go. While Indian response to this revelation was at best feeble, USA and France are well on their way to get to the details of accounts of 3-4000 of their citizens from these banks. But the most astonishing part of the revelation is that how an impoverished country could stack such staggering sum, surpassing any other country in the world. The disturbing part of the news is that ill-gotten money fly out to tax-havens at an astonishing rate of over Rs 100,000 Cr a year and the rate has continually been increasing. It is my belief that the government must act positively and at war-footing to retrieve what is due to our nation – with an effort that must better what was demonstrated post 26/11. It is also my belief that while terrorism has afflicted serious blow on many and hurt our national pride, black money and corruption are far more serious – it is a cancer that has spread silently and viciously afflicting entire society both on body and mind that requires remedial measures.

Recovery of Indian money from the Swiss Bank is important to our national pride, as important as the ways we had gone collecting Indian artifices lying in museums abroad. If Indian government is hesitating and the Swiss are stalling, public awareness should be raised to the next level. Till now, political parties have supported the move but the impetus is missing causing people to wonder if politicians have a stake in Swiss accounts. We should consider ways and means to bring pressure on Swiss government through public movement that must gather momentum as a national objective and for a national cause. We hope to hear views on the steps that the country must take at this gathering.

Illicit outflows to Swiss and other foreign banks are only one part of the black money generated in the system. Much of it remains in the country. It is therefore obvious that the total quantum generated in India is of an unimaginable magnitude. The ill effect of that is perpetuating poverty, maladministration, poor governance and badly afflicted society. While India wants to be a global player and seeks a seat in UN Security Council, to be branded as one of the most corrupt nations in the world does not augur well. It is estimated that the country loses around Rs two lakh crores revenue a year due to corruption in taxation departments. Corruption while basically is about drawing favor for money, in generic sense it also includes nepotism, misuse of public resources, power and position, abuse of authority, dishonesty by those employed in public services and lack of integrity. It is one single phenomenon that demoralizes the public and has the potential to de-stabilize the country. In the process, not only an undeserving or a non-entitled person gets the favor but down the line it promotes incompetency and adversely affect productivity. In a corrupt State, efficiency and skills are not recognized. Regrettably, after gaining independence we are being looted and exploited by our own brethrens – probably worse than what foreigners did to us.

There could be many reasons for such deterioration. One of the important causes could be that resource mobilization and wealth accrual have not kept up with population growth and people's expectations. At Independence, we were 350 million. Since then, our population has tripled where as resources have not.

Infrastructure and resources are never adequate to meet even the essentials that our Constitution promises. Global and societal changes have brought attitudinal change. Gandhian values are now old-fashioned. Money is not evil but the means to get what one wants. People are now impatient; want those extra things that were considered a luxury once upon a time. Greed is now an accepted part of life.

Management of Indian democracy, even after 60 years of experience has been a great disappointment. The government machinery could not fulfill public expectations. Social fabric of modern India has gradually changed - moving away from joint family system which extended traditionally security and support. This change has exerted pressure on the government to augment social security and to provide quality governance. This has created an overload and frequent breakdowns. Individuals now fend for themselves and corruption happens to be one of the means. Instead of improving efficiency and effectiveness, the government machinery grew to a gigantic proportion furthering inefficiency and red-tapes, but remaining unaccountable.

In my opinion, we need dual approach – one to enforce accountability and responsibility of those at various levels of management and supervision and secondly to maximize public awareness to their responsibilities as citizens and their rights and strengthen public information and services. Currently laws and rules regarding accountability are biased towards protecting the government servant and soft towards their omission and commission. These require changes whereby inefficiency and carelessness are discouraged and efficiency and initiative are recognized. Indian laws that are archaic and complex like labor law need to be simplified and brought in line with other successful democracies.

My proposal for strengthening information on rights of citizens and services is to exploit the media. When we see many religious channels prospering, why not a public service channel? I propose area or city-wise TV channels that could run programs on citizens' responsibilities, bring out problems, and organize discussions with participation from officials, media and citizens. This would possibly cut down RTIs and build better societal interaction. We seldom hear problems faced by public servants and police in the line of duty; the channel could well be an outlet for them. If successful, this method of dissemination and interaction could proliferate and make excellent contribution. The recent advertisement "Jago-Re" by Tata-Tea is an interesting theme that relates to fighting corruption.

Since my background is Defence, I should cover some aspects that are often talked about - Inefficiency and corruption in Defence. Periodically, number of exposures is made on financial irregularity and corruption in Defence. The current budget for Defence is over Rs. 1,40,000 Cr out of which Rs 87,000 Cr would go towards revenue expenditure – that would be towards operating expenditure. Around Rs. 54,000 Cr would be spent on acquisition. This is considerable sum of money to be spent in a year. Capital expenditure decisions and processes are centrally managed with oversight from MOD bureaucracy. CAG brings out periodically comprehensive reports on irregularities and performance audits. Managing defence expenditure is no different from those followed in other government departments and ministries. Considerable time and effort are spent to follow processes, making enormous number of notings and explanations on files on the approval ladder, yet bomb-shells drop now and then exposing deviations and corruption. Service HQ, for all practical purposes are treated as Departments in Govt of India. There is very little scope for large corruption to occur without connivance of a number of officials in the chain. Committees and processes dilute accountability to the extent it becomes impossible to pin-point person or persons responsible for breach or failures other than in a few cases. Only Indian democracy keeps the military out of ministry of defence where bureaucrats and uniformed personnel are segregated functionally and administratively. This is not healthy for good administration. Efforts were made to convert MOD as an "Integrated

HQ of Ministry of Defence” to bring Service HQ as composite function of Ministry of Defence to facilitate transparency in decision making. But this has not succeeded.

As a structure, Armed Forces have well demarcated functional responsibility where any omission or commission is detected and the person is made accountable. Corruption and financial irregularity in revenue expenditures are relatively easy to detect and officials are made accountable. Military personnel are tried under military law for any offense committed and disposals are reasonably quick.

The Ministry of Defence and Armed Forces HQs could improve accountability through reorganization and delegation of powers. The Minister of Defence could review once a year thoroughly the status weapons, inventory, supply chain management, serviceability training status and morale as is done annually by the US government. Such periodic review could eliminate surprises of serious short-falls that come to light only when an operation is imminent.

I sincerely look forward to exchange of views on actions that should be initiated to overcome the maladies that we face as a nation today.