

Quality of Work and Corruption

We care so little about the quality of assets in our public environment, poor quality being an outcome of corruption. When can we hope for a change? Some thoughts on corruption.

SHOBHIT MAHAJAN

Walking along the roads and lanes of the city where I live, I am constantly struck by a peculiar sight. The footpaths—several of them laid not too long ago—are impossible to walk on. This is not because they are broken or missing. They are just unusable!

Let me explain. The pavements are laid out with interlocking bricks made of concrete. This is, of course, a great idea since these would be able to withstand the vagaries of the weather as well as other abuse. Excepting, they are laid out without levelling and strengthening the ground beneath them! The result is an undulating surface which is not just impossible, but positively dangerous, to walk on.

The municipal corporation of my city is one of the richest in the country in per capita terms, thanks to the booming economy of the city. And to give it credit, it does undertake a lot of infrastructure projects. Thus, for instance, the narrow lanes and small roads in the densely populated areas are now all concrete, which makes them usable throughout the year. Similarly, the major arterial roads have been widened, concretised and well lit. Pavements along all the major roads have been part of this infrastructure upgrade.

Resources thus are not an issue—the corporation is spending ample money to get the pavements made. It is not even a question of technology—the use of interlocking concrete bricks makes immense sense in our conditions. So what is the issue that we can't even seem to get a simple thing like a usable pavement on flat terrain right?

There are, to my mind, two possible reasons for this; and both are important to understand. The first is about an attitude towards quality and the second is about dereliction of duty by public servants and corruption.

The issue of quality in workmanship is a significant one. It has nothing to do with work done by “unqualified” workmen or even work done for the government. The plumber, painter or the electrician working in your house will have little regard in general for the quality of his workmanship. Think of the number of times a newly fixed tap will drip just because the washer hasn't been put right, etc. And one only needs to look at the jumble of wires near any electric

pole on the road to see that the electricity department doesn't give a fig for either aesthetics or, in this case, public safety. Lest we think this utter disregard towards quality is peculiar to small time self-employed workmen or lazy and careless government employees, think of the “world's second best airport” in Delhi. It was designed by some of the best architects and constructed using the most modern design and technology by some of the best contractors in the world. And what happens? Come the first monsoon, and the whole place is flooded!

Was it always like this or is it something that has happened recently? I think that it is something which happened in the last few decades when our society underwent an uneven transition to a more or less pure market economy. The informal, personal networks were gradually replaced by the market. Earlier there used to be a curious mixture of monetary and client–patron relationship, where the workmen would develop a kinship with the client which went beyond the cash transaction. This got replaced by a situation where the relationship becomes purely transactional, with an implicit assumption of a one-off interaction. This has contributed vastly to the neglect of quality in workmanship. Of course, this brutal marketisation also has meant that the workmen have stopped taking pride in their work. In a sense, they have made the transition from artisans to wage labour.

This disregard for quality goes hand in hand with corruption in the state agencies. Any public work is seen as an opportunity for pelf. The larger the value of the project, the more enthusiastic the agency is to implement it. Thus, instead of spending a small amount on maintenance of buildings, there is always pressure to construct new ones since there is more scope for corruption.

All this has been well known for a long time—the Public Works Department (PWD), the Irrigation Department, Bridges and Roads (B&R) and the Military Engineer Services (MES) have had a reputation for being hotbeds of corruption for several decades (even in the pre-independence era, as my mother would tell me). Newly laid roads being washed out in

The strategies to be adopted to minimise or root out corruption will depend on one's understanding of the phenomenon—an understanding which incorporates the historical experience of not just our society but other societies too

Web Exclusives

The Web Exclusives section on the journal's website (<http://www.epw.in>) features articles written for the web edition. These articles are usually on current affairs and will be short pieces offering a first comment.

The articles normally do not appear in the print edition.

Readers of the print edition are invited to visit the Web Exclusives section which sees new articles published every week.

the first monsoon is something all of us are familiar with. Why does this happen?

Let us restrict ourselves to non-harassment bribes. That is to say, when a PWD overseer overlooks substandard work by a contractor, it is not about him denying what is legitimately the contractor's right unless a bribe is paid. Instead, he and the contractor are both colluding to defraud the exchequer. This is different from a clerk delaying giving you your birth certificate unless you pay him, which would be a harassment bribe.

Much has been written about the causes of corruption. Poor remuneration in the public sector compared to the private sector, low risk of punishment, lack of a feeling of ownership and identification with the organisation, and so on. All of the above are obviously factors when it comes to the general level of corruption in a society. However, there is another fruitful way to try to understand the phenomenon and that is to do a comparative historical analysis.

Let me give an example. I was recently in Vancouver and spent a week in a small suburb of the city. The pavements, the roads, the traffic signals, etc, were all, as expected, well-built and well maintained. Now, in most North American cities, the public services are the responsibility of the local government, the equivalent of our municipality. The revenue collected through various taxes locally is spent locally. The officials are all elected by the community and they manage the affairs. How is it that things work there? Or, to put it differently, why is it that the supervisor for pavements, say, does not take a bribe to overlook shoddy work done by private contractors?

I am not suggesting that there is no corruption in other countries, in this case, in Canada. However, at this level, this seems to be not an important variable in the quality of public services. If one looks at history, one would realise that this was not always the case. The corrupt City Hall and the police force before and during the Depression era, or during prohibition are the stuff of legend and has been the subject of many films and novels. Think of the corrupt officials in *Chinatown* who want a dam built to benefit the developers in the iconic movie or the mayor in *Gangster Squad* who is on the payroll of a notorious gangster/businessman. What happened in the years subsequent to the world war that this changed substantially? Was it the enormous prosperity of the boom years? Was it the growth of the educated middle class? It would be instructive to find out since that would give us a clue as to what needs to be done to go from this equilibrium point of low-level, everyday corruption to another equilibrium point of no, or minimal, corruption in everyday affairs.

There are of course many issues in corruption, starting with the definition of what constitutes corruption. Is it only exchange of money in return for favours (like the PWD overseer above) or is it the pure harassment kind of corruption? Or is it also misuse of the machinery at one's

disposal, of course justified with a flexible definition of perks and privileges? Does it make sense to have a puritan view in this matter and regard any small transgression or misuse as corruption which is equally deplorable morally as large-scale exchange of money? Or is it better to be realistic and ignore small misuses as things which happen and don't cause much friction in the workings of the state? Alternatively, should we adopt a utilitarian perspective and say that it is impossible to curb small misuses and so it is important to concentrate one's energies in catching the big fish?

The strategies to be adopted to minimise or root out corruption will depend on one's understanding of the phenomenon—an understanding which incorporates the historical experience of not just our society but other societies too. Citizen vigilantes carrying out sting operations using their mobiles might make for good television news but these Haroun al-Rashid tactics will have no effect on the kind of corruption (non-harassment) that I am alluding to simply because in these situations, it is rational for both parties to keep it a secret. For that, much more thought will need to be given to our system of checks and balances, incentives, structures of governance, and so on. In the meantime, the pavements on my walking route continue to sink deeper and deeper.

Shobhit Mahajan (shobhit.mahajan@gmail.com) is Professor of Physics and Astrophysics at the University of Delhi.