

# Building a just society

Corruption would jeopardise economic development and heighten inequalities, says Uttam Gupta

**R**ECENTLY, in an address to the first Regional Indira Gandhi Conference, the Prime Minister is reported to have said that "India must now seek to go beyond a system of indirect and passive democracy to build a just society free from social distortions like corruption and discrimination based on religion, caste and even sex." On corruption specifically he said that it is "anti-ethical to a good society and was the worst form of discrimination which led to denial of opportunity to the deserving."

There could not have been a better description of the state of affairs and the kind of society that we should be working for. And, coming as it is from the functional head of the Government, it is all the more reassuring particularly for the victims of the discriminating tendencies.

Discrimination based on caste, religion and sex is not a new phenomenon although the issue comes up with varying intensity at the time of elections and takes a back seat at other times. The same could be said of corruption. In recent years, it has assumed menacing dimensions, affecting practically all institutions of life, including administration, law and order, development/welfare programmes, social services, infrastructure, industry and trade.

The important point to note is that, whereas not long ago the very news of an act of bribe would stir the conscience of even the least sensitive, at present this is accepted as a way of life. Things have reached such a pass that even a man firmly committed to human values, considers the bribe to be more important than the money he may have to spend for the services that he gets and for which an official receipt is issued to him; for, he too knows that, but for the former, his job may not be done at all or delayed to the point of subjecting him to an irreparable loss. Consequently, even though the law prohibits this pernicious practice and provides for appropriate punishment to the guilty, corruption appears to have gained legitimacy. It has social legitimacy too as its practice generates quick money and wealth which in turn, helps in acquiring status in society. The fact that an offender in this category is rarely punished, further improves the chances of maintaining good status.

Apart from having the devastating potential of jeopardising economic development, corruption has serious repercussions in terms of inequalities — both social and economic. The money required to be spent on graft is in the nature of a tax, with the only difference that, while it may be possible to evade normal taxes required to be paid to the government, the former has to be necessarily paid. The rich and the powerful can afford to pay this 'tax' and may even offset the consequential loss on this account through gains elsewhere, but the poor are unambiguously in a disad-

vantaged position.

Corruption also acts to frustrate the potentially positive impact of targeted welfare programmes and development schemes. In this context, it may be worthwhile to mention the scheme launched by the former Prime Minister, Shri Rajiv Gandhi, in 1985, which aimed at providing safe drinking water in all the villages in the country. A mindboggling Rs 18,000 crore was spent under the scheme and the result was that the number of villages without safe drinking water increased from 160 thousand in 1985 to 180 thousand in 1991. Yet another is the CAG's adverse comment on the working of the IRDP, a key poverty alleviation programme. An important instrument for promoting equality of

income and wealth and reducing discrimination is thus turned into a tool for perpetuating inequalities.

The poor and the weak get hurt in yet another way — the tendency of the tax/revenue collector to look to his own gains rather than to optimise collections for the exchequer. Similar tendencies are exhibited by those spending government money for welfare programmes and overall governance, leading to inevitable increases in the budget deficit. At the end of every year, the revised estimates are substantially higher than the budgeted deficits. And, the deviations can be

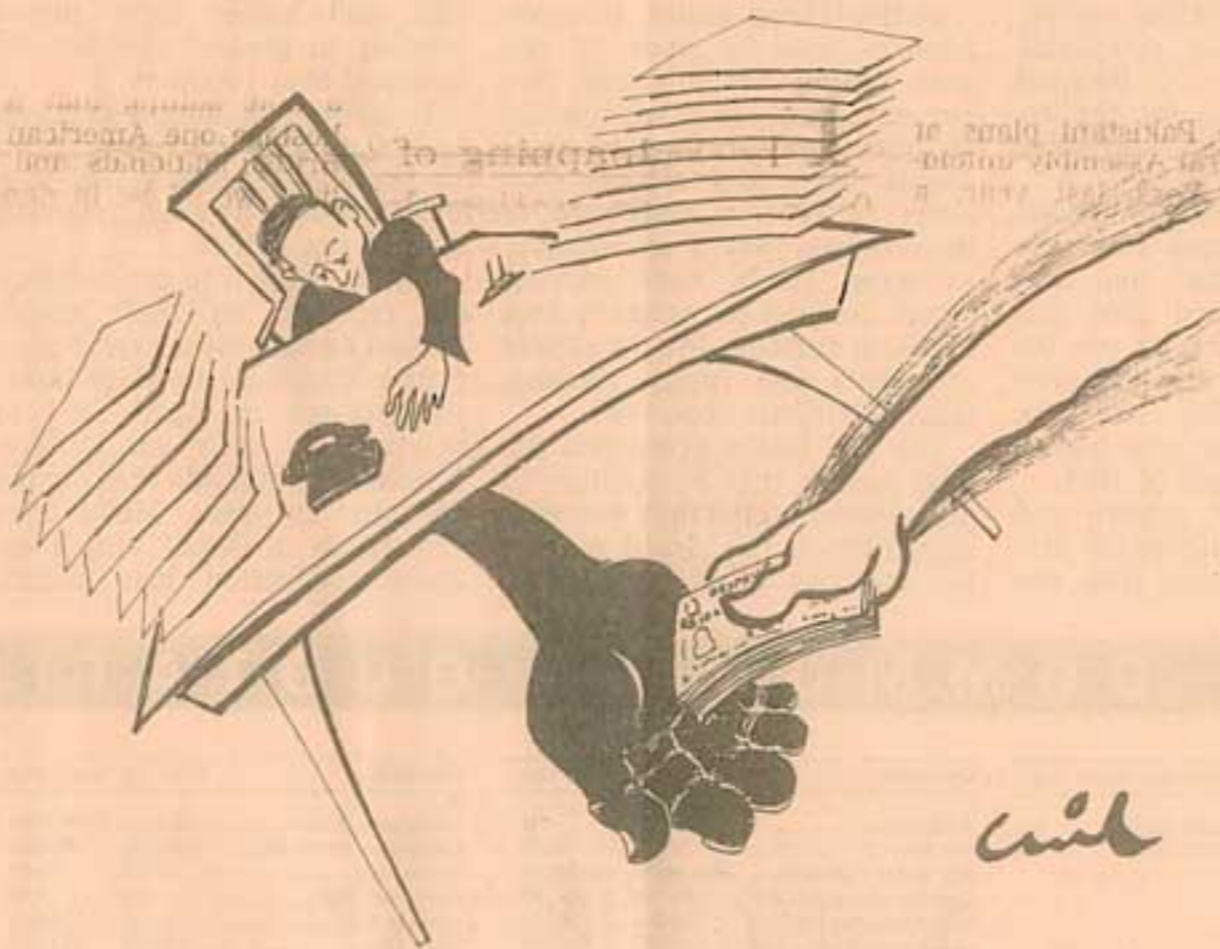
administrative hierarchy, both in the Centre and states, a system of awards may be instituted to honour an officer who is known for his honesty and integrity.

A second component of the strategy should be to allow free and fair discussion on the subject. Although corruption is the biggest problem facing the nation, its very mention today is looked upon with contempt. This practice must change. It may even be a good idea to have an open house discussion. At times, the possibility of an offender coming under cloud on a public fora is a major deterrent.

Third, the Government should speedily bring about reforms in the electoral system. It should adopt the package recommended by the Goswami Committee. A piecemeal and partisan approach of the type adopted in the bill introduced in the extraordinary session of Parliament in June, 1994, has to be avoided. State funding of elections may be a desirable step; but this may not produce results in the absence of the first two steps. Because, in the present debased social and administrative system, it is not difficult to circumvent the rules.

Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, no office, however high, should be kept outside the purview of the law of the land. In the early 1970s, Smt Indira Gandhi had moved the Lok Pal Bill, but the proposed Constitutional Amendment sought to keep the office of the Prime Minister beyond its jurisdiction. Likewise, in some of the states, for instance, Maharashtra, the institution of Lok Ayukta does not cover the Chief Minister. All political parties in the country would do well to work for a consensus to remove these lacunae in the Lok Pal and the Lok Ayukta institutions.

Today, even a man at the lowest rung of the administration and social hierarchy seeks to justify his wrongful act by citing big scandals in which the highest functionaries in the Government have come under cloud. The latter have not made any sincere attempt to exonerate themselves and have left the blot on their image to be washed by the forgetful memory of the general public. We need to make sure that the situation changes and that can happen only if everyone, irrespective of the position he holds, is made accountable.



explained only by unexpected developments. The consequential large-scale deficit finance results in higher money supply with no matching increase in production of goods and services. The net result is inflation which hits the poor most.

The issue of corruption has to be addressed in a multi-dimensional framework. Strengthening of the existing legal, administrative and enforcement machinery is undoubtedly a basic requirement. But, this has to be backed by a strong will, which can come only when those who govern keep the national interest above everything else. The institutions of learning can contribute to this by inculcating human values.

Further, at various rungs of the