

Sociobiological basis of corruption – Relevance to corporate world¹

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Good evening, ladies and gentlemen,

I am delighted and honored to give this talk in the annual Indsearch public lecture series. I must thank Dr. Ramakrishna for inviting me and all his colleagues at Indsearch for making it possible.

Normally I give talks about our work of sustainable development, but being a concerned citizen of this great country am also deeply troubled, just like all of you, by the rise of corruption and hence grabbed the opportunity of talking about it.

The theme of this year's lectures is "Corruption and corporate sustainability". It is a very timely topic and I am told that competent people from corporate world are also speakers in this series. I think they are more qualified to talk about corporate sustainability and corruption and hence will focus my talk on what makes us greedy and insecure-the two driving forces of corruption. Thus, I will talk about the socio-biological basis of corruption and will allude briefly later on to how it affects corporate sustainability.

Corruption is nothing new in our society or in any other society of the world. As long as humans are greedy, corruption will always remain. In a celebrated story in the Panchatantra-the ancient Indian fable, the greed of a jackal makes the lion kill his best friend the bull. And the whole delightful story is about how slowly but surely the cunning jackal seduces the lion into thinking that the bull, his best friend is his greatest enemy! In the same way the nexus of corrupt politicians, some

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corporate houses, builders etc. has systematically looted the system and the country.



This cartoon sums up nicely the general impression that people have about corruption in government and private sector.

Even in the so-called developed countries the corruption exists, but at high levels. What is horrible in India is the amount, depth and pervasiveness of corruption. According to some estimates each year [India loses about one trillion dollars](#) because of corruption.

Similarly, some others have estimated that almost Rs. 100 lakh crore of ill-gotten money is stashed by Indians in foreign banks. One is not sure of the source or the veracity of these numbers but the fact remains that they are large. Recently huge amounts of cash and jewellery have been unearthed in so called ashrams and mandirs. Even "godmen" are not immune to corruption! Since huge money is involved in mandirs it is quite possible that in the near future we may even have a ministry of mandir affairs as depicted in this cartoon!



The first casualty of corruption is governance. So, most of the problems that our country is facing today have come about because of non-governance. Right from the top to the bottom rules are flouted with impunity. This also leads to a free for all situation which further fuels corruption and this is the reason why it has seeped so deeply into our country's fabric. Since there is no governance, firefighting by ruling elite is the order of the day and is done on whatever comes in their vision field as dictated mostly by TV news media.

Non-governance also leads to terrorism which affects the financial health of the country and has direct bearing on corporate India. Thus, it is in the interest of corporate India to work for and further the cause of a corruption-less society.

The greed that fuels corruption also shows up in other things. For example, a top corporate honcho jets frequently in his private plane to New York just in order to do four hours of shopping! His state-of-the-art jet is used by all top politicians. This is also a classical case of collusion between the corporate world and corrupt politicians. Another corporate bigwig lives in a house costing Rs. 4,500 crores while all around his multistorey house are poor people's huts! The splurging of wealth and the extravagant lifestyle of corporate India is creating a huge disparity in the population and could be an engine of corruption and civil strife. As a well-known writer P. Sainath has said, the fastest growing sector in India is not the service sector or the IT sector but the inequality sector! The rise of Maoist and Naxalite movements in one third of the country could be a direct outcome of this inequality.

One also wonders how the great tradition of the patriotic freedom fighters who were honest and honorable people, and who lived very simply, gave place to extremely dishonest, unsavory, and corrupt politicians living an extravagant lifestyle far removed from their constituency. This transformation did not happen overnight but is a result of the slow and steady deterioration of public life and hence the cancer of corruption has spread very deeply into the fabric of our country. And now with the modern means of communication like mobile phones, twitter, internet etc., people have become aware of it and are getting organized against it. This has created a critical mass of anger and frustration and hence the general outcry that you presently hear.

Today is 9th August or the Kranti Diwas. It is on this day in 1942 that Mahatma Gandhi gave a national call for the British to "Quit India". Maybe we should take a pledge today to get rid of corruption from our country. We cannot do it in one day but becoming aware of it and thinking about how and what we can do individually will greatly help in this clean-up process.

Almost all of us - sometime or the other - have been a victim of corruption. We regularly face an occasion where somebody either in railways, in income tax

offices, in the banks, in the RTO, or in almost every place where we have to deal with an organization or government office, asks for a bribe. Too often the justification for giving a bribe is to expedite the process since bureaucratic red tape causes long delay. Besides bribes are given to avoid hassles since the laws and rules of this country, unfortunately, are such that government officials have an enormous power to harass and cause pain to ordinary citizens making their life miserable.

Nevertheless, we always have a tendency to blame the officers of these organizations and the government but never ourselves though corruption is a two-way street. The acceptor of graft and its giver are both responsible for corruption. As individuals we are therefore equally responsible for this sorry state of affairs.

There are nearly 1 billion adults in this country and each one will have a story to tell about corruption and may even have a theory on how to stop it. However, I feel that most of the remedies for stopping corruption like making better and harsher laws etc are like ointments which superficially and momentarily stop the pain but never cure the cause of pain. It is worth noting that there are already enough laws to stop corruption provided they are implemented properly. In the absence of governance making more laws may not be very productive.

Today in my talk I will therefore try to present a point of view of why we as individuals become greedy for materials and resources and how we can modify and use the greed emotion for pursuing better causes. Because once we understand the cause then only can we take corrective steps.

Most of the things that I will discuss today have come from my own [experiences of trying to live a simple, sustainable and holistic life](#) in rural Maharashtra.

Genesis of corruption

All of us aspire to have a good life and happiness. There are as many definitions of happiness as there are people. But generally, people want to have their basic needs taken care of which includes a decent place to live, mobility, good education for their children, clean environment, a challenging workplace, good and wholesome entertainment and enough money to meet their usual daily

requirements. These are the issues around which modern industrial societies have evolved and yet have created the biggest problem of totally unsustainable lifestyles fueled by greed.

For example, most Indians aspire to have a lifestyle of western nations which is consumptive, energy-intensive and unsustainable. Thus, in the U.S. the per capita energy consumption is 350 GJ/yr, whereas in India it is a low of 18 GJ/yr. If each citizen of India tries to live an American lifestyle, then the whole world's energy and material resources will be needed just for India. Besides being unsustainable, this lifestyle will also lead to corruption, disparity and other consequent social problems. Hence the control of greed for resources and energy or better yet the sublimation of greed emotions into higher ones like humility and simplicity can lead to sustainability, happiness and a rewarding life.

I believe an [emotionally satisfying lifestyle is possible with much less energy](#) than is consumed by an average U.S. citizen. Thus, an energy consumption of 40-60 GJ/person/yr or one-seventh that of the US can provide a decent and emotionally satisfying lifestyle. This type of energy consumption will put much less pressure on earth's resources besides reducing substantially the environmental pollution. However, it can be possible only if we reduce our greed by becoming spiritual and follow the maxim of "simple living and high thinking".

The basis of greed is desire. Desire manifests itself in different forms like lust, aim, ambition, control, goal, etc. However, the driving force is the same – power, fame and money and I think it ultimately boils down to control and hence power. Some also call it an ego trip.

As our brains develop right from our birth, the fast-expanding neuron numbers have to form memory pathways. This process is accomplished by sensory perception where the inputs from the senses help form the memory. We are therefore hardwired to increase our experience and memories. This is the basis of desire. Hence desire and brain are interlinked. As long as the brain exists there will always be desire.

Desire is fueled by experience. A living being wants to experience the world. This is an inherent trait of all life forms. We are wired for experience. Urge for maximization of experience fuels the desire. Whether the desire is for sex, money, fame, power etc., it is driven by the same need to maximize experience.

One of the outcomes of desire is possession. We feel a need to possess whatever we desire whether it is a person, object or even an idea. Possession helps in maximization of experience. As we absorb "experience" through our senses, the brain processes this information. It is during this process that we "decide" whether our desires are fulfilled or not. Fulfillment of desires therefore helps us in releasing the "possessions". A powerful processor or the mind can get its desires fulfilled quite easily without physically possessing the objects of desire. While on the other hand a weaker brain needs to possess a lot more things for fulfillment of desires and this leads to greed. Therefore, to live a sustainable life it is necessary to have a powerful brain processor. We will talk later on about how to develop a powerful brain processor.

Desire is a useful and necessary emotion. It allows us to achieve something and be active. Without desire we will be lifeless, dead or like stones. However, what we need to do is to satiate or channel our desires so that they get fulfilled without too much taxing of resources, materials and energy.

Satiation of desire requires energy and material resources and excessive desire leads to greed and hence to unsustainability. A person's wisdom helps to keep a check on desires. In its absence the mind goes into an ever-expanding spiral of greed and excess. Unresolved desires produce memory knots or stresses which have the mechanism of always directing the brain to them and creating anger, frustration and hence depression. This happens because the thought production is channeled or influenced by the existing memories. If the brain has more memory knots of unfulfilled desires, then the new thoughts will be centered and focused around them leading to anger and frustration.

A stressed mind also gets angry very fast. Anger is an emotion, which occurs when things don't happen the way we want them to happen. Thus, a powerful processor or mind which can coolly and calmly look at and evaluate all the possibilities (deep

thought helps do that) may have better conflict and anger resolution capabilities than a shallow-thinking mind. Thus, insecurity and anger may be related.

How to reduce greed and achieve happiness

Happiness is a state of mind. We feel happy and enjoy life through our senses and the mind. The brain processes the information from the senses and our level of happiness is dictated by its processing power. A powerful brain (the processor) which produces deep thought can therefore extract more information from the sensory signals and can give us more happiness since the mind gets satisfied easily. Besides it can look at a greater number of eventualities and hence can resolve issues amicably. A smaller processor obviously needs many more inputs to reach the same enjoyment or satisfaction level. Thus, weaker brains need more resources to occupy them and this leads to greed and unsustainable lifestyle.

A powerful brain or a processor also changes the priorities in life and helps in focusing on getting personal happiness through mental peace rather than satisfaction of material needs. Such a brain allows us to think deeply and concentrate during which we can get "lost" in processing that information. When concentration on a single thought is carried out regularly and continuously for a long time, it takes our mind away from our insecurities and hence gives us a feeling of calmness, well being and happiness.

The insecurity of human beings comes when they have nothing to do. "An empty mind is the devil's workshop" is an old saying. Thus, activities such as hoarding of wealth and material goods are the result of a shallow mind. Such a mind seeks enjoyment and gets it in activities like binge shopping etc. A powerful mind is capable of finding enjoyment within and makes a person self-contented and happy. Thus, the act of accumulation or hoarding of anything is a sign of a lower intelligence level since it is driven by fear complex of losing out or not having enough. For example, we can wear only one shirt and one pant at a time so what is the need to have 100 shirts and pants? Similarly, we can live in one house or drive one car. So, what is the need to have many houses and a dozen cars? A powerful mind can resolve these issues and this leads to a sustainable lifestyle.

One of the aspects of a powerful processor and an evolved brain is that it also becomes acutely aware and sensitive of its surroundings. Awareness happens because of the need for maximization of experience and the brain seeks ever-expanding spheres of experience. Thus, it is able to expand its horizons to encompass our world, solar system and universe. This expansion gives us a tremendous sense of peace, tranquility and perspective on our life. **This is the genesis of wisdom.** This awareness and sensitivity to surroundings is also the **genesis of Ahimsa or nonviolence** since this makes all life sacred. Wisdom and nonviolence towards nature helps us in living sustainably and not becoming corrupt.

How to produce a powerful processor?

Focus on a single thought or a desired object for a long time is the essence of yoga (called *Sanyam* in Patanjali Yoga). This is also called concentration, meditation or dhyana. Success in any field is directly proportional to concentration. All great ideas, thoughts, inventions etc. have come about by people who had power of intense concentration. Sanyam on any idea or object also produces happiness. A possible mechanism could be that this concentration somehow helps stimulate or “tickle” the pituitary gland and gives us a sense of well being.

Meditation and increased concentration not only help produce a powerful processor but also have tremendous impact on the physical body. A large body of scientific data now exists which shows the [beneficial effects of meditation on heart, blood pressure and whole horde of modern ailments](#). Besides it is a great stress reliever. Modern lifestyle produces tremendous conflict in the mind and creates mental stress. Meditation therefore helps in relieving the stress.

One is never too old to learn meditation. To become better human beings, we should therefore learn to cultivate deep thought and focus.

So how do we create the conditions for us to think deeply and produce a powerful brain? Today’s society does not put a premium on reading or thinking deeply about something. The pace of life together with information overload from TV, radio and other electronic media is creating a new generation of humans with very short time-span focus. Deep thought requires energy, application and will to achieve it.

Short attention span does not require much effort and hence is easy on the mind. However, if we consciously create in our children from very [early age the desire to read which will help them cultivate the habit of imagination and daydreaming](#), then there is a chance of creating a society which is more focused and happier. Thus, if children are trained right from kindergarten on how to make their minds powerful and focus on reading, thinking and contemplation then we can create a gentler and more sustainable society. The small individual step for a corruption-less society therefore starts with school.

Children who have an active imagination daydream a lot. The brain of an active child is very powerful and in the absence of any structured thought or focus, starts a movie of imagination. Once this movie is started then there is a continuous flow of thoughts in this direction and the movie gets bigger and bigger till it takes on a life of its own. Children do it because it is the genesis of deep thought and brings happiness to them.

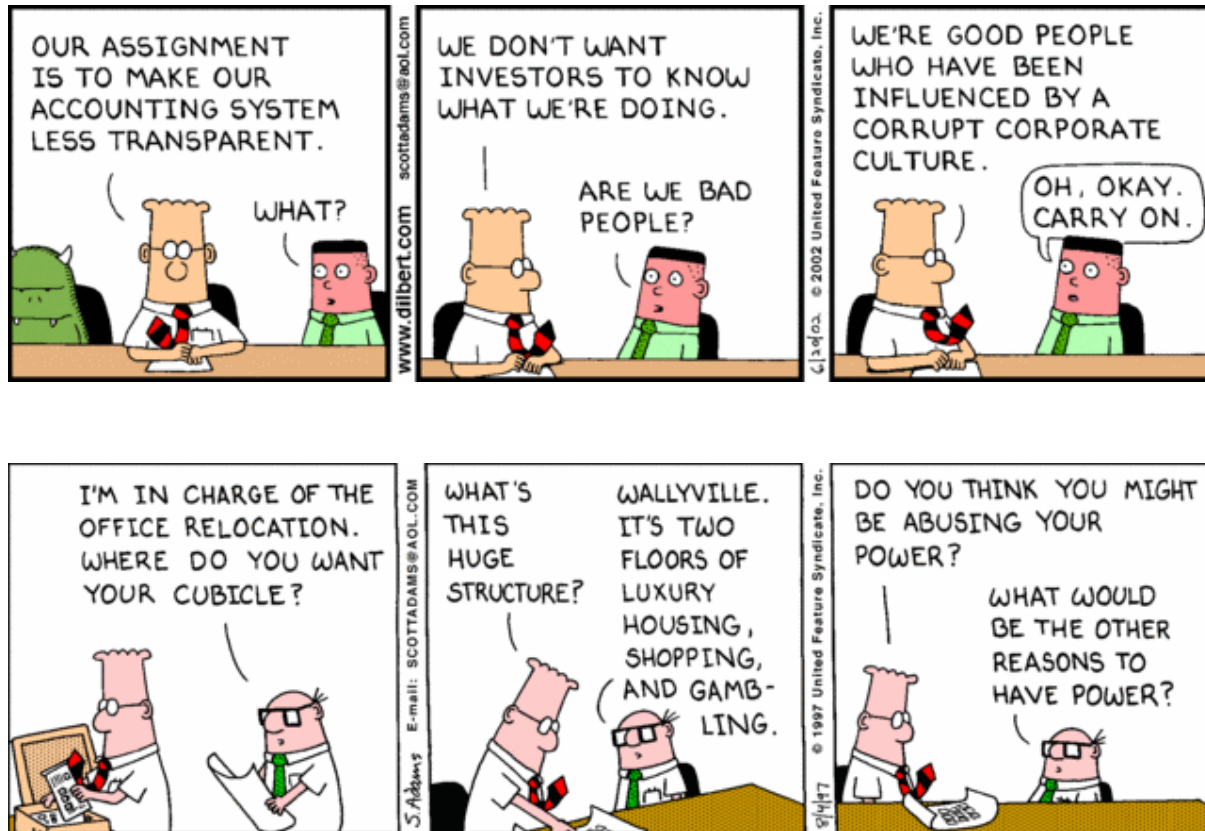
However, for this free flow imagination to take place it is necessary that children are challenged intellectually. This puts a heavy onus on teachers. How to have excellent teachers who inspire and instill in young children a desire to learn, think deeply and have a sense of what is wrong and what is right is a [great challenge for all of us](#). Nevertheless, it is worth pursuing for the betterment of future India.

I must also add that too often morality is brought into play to stop corruption. It is a common refrain that because the moral fibre of the society is fractured or weak it leads to corruption. Morality is fine if it is based on universal truths. When it is based on human laws which are not acceptable to all then bringing morality to bear on reducing corruption can lead to more mental knots.

A simpler mechanism is that once the greed impulse is reduced, life becomes simpler and there is no need to hoard goods and resources. This automatically reduces the corruption.

Relevance for corporate world

Today the corporate world is presented in pretty poor light. They are considered as fueling corruption by colluding with politicians in land grabbing, shady deals and parking their ill-gotten wealth abroad, among others. These Dilbert cartoons show some of these attributes of corporate world!



Not all corporations are corrupt. Nevertheless, they will have to do a lot more work to remove the stigma and perception of corruption and insensitivity to the plight of poor people.

I believe the corporate world has tremendous power to reduce corruption and help in sustainable development. They control the mass media which can be a great agent of change. In a modern democratic society, the mass media can play a vital role in educating people to live sustainably and highlight the corrupt practices of various agencies and individuals. It is trying to do so but in a limited way and much more needs to be done.

The Corporate world is a part of society. It is made up of people like you and me. If society suffers because of corruption and non-governance then the corporate world will suffer too. Thus, it is in their interest to be very active in reducing corruption.

Once the people who head the corporations have their greed in check they can then contribute tremendously to the betterment of society. Without the wisdom and the powerful brain processor the captains of industry get caught up in number games. The result is that they do not care about how they can make a difference to the lives of unfortunate fellow beings but get completely bogged down in superlative number game such as; biggest jets, highest turnover, maximum profit etc. etc.

One of the aspects of a powerful and sensitive mind is that it makes you humble. Thus, you do not do things to show off and keep up with the Joneses. This helps one focus on issues of greater good. An insensitive mind on the other hand gets its "high" from numbers and not in creating a better world.

A sensitive mind also becomes empathetic to its surroundings and this gives rise to the desire to give back something to the society and help less fortunate fellow beings. All around us are examples of poverty. Around 60% of our rural population lives in primitive conditions. They have no electricity, no safe drinking water and cook on primitive biomass stoves. Their lives are stuck in the dark ages. Besides the poor quality of energy and devices available to them, indoor air pollution caused by cooking on biomass stoves kills about 4 lakh people in rural India every year.

An enlightened corporate world can provide goods, services and solutions to improve their quality of life and bring this huge mass of people into mainstream development process. This can only happen when they reduce their greed for enormous profits. [The Corporate world which has the resources, funds and capabilities can therefore play a vital role in this process.](#)

I believe that the whole purpose of our existence is to increase personal and societal infrastructure. Personal infrastructure includes personal health, happiness and general well being. By improving our personal "infrastructure" we become

better human beings and it helps in our emotional growth and evolution. By giving back something to the society so that its "infrastructure" increases we help in mankind's evolution. Both these activities when carried out simultaneously can give us a great joy and satisfaction.

There are few corporate leaders worldwide who are following this philosophy. Warren Buffet the great American philanthropist has given most of his wealth to charities. He lives a simple but decent life and feels that wealth should be used for helping the unfortunate fellow beings. He seems to be following Gandhiji's trusteeship model in which the Mahatma had mooted the idea that generation of wealth by the corporate world should be done for maximum good and not for personal benefit and grandeur. Closer to home, [Jamshedji Tata was another such great philanthropist in early 1900s.](#) There is a need for captains of present Indian corporate world to follow these examples.

Finally, it is a sobering thought to consider that numbers and time are on the side of the rural population. The recent events in the Middle East and the spread of the Maoist movement in the country have shown that population which has information available through mass media like TV or cell phones etc. but with no means of improving their lives can create very unstable conditions which are not conducive to the economic growth of the country.

It is therefore in the interest of the corporate world to engage these marginalized people because it is possible that India Inc will not progress or even survive without these 60% of rural poor and marginalized people being brought into mainstream development. That can only happen when goods and services to improve their quality of life are provided at reasonable cost-something that the corporate world can do easily if they reduce their greed.

The corporate world can also take lessons from history of the freedom movement where major industrialists of India whole heartedly supported Gandhiji's program by providing intellectual and financial capital to it. There were many greedy industrialists and people with means during Gandhiji's time also, but he gave [them a higher purpose in life](#) of being a part of freedom movement. This helped a large population sublimate their greed for getting independence for India.

I think helping the 60% rural population to improve their quality of life could be a new higher purpose. Thus, the corporate world helping in this process together with reduction in their greed can play an extremely important role in building a sustainable, happy and a great India.

Thank you.

[A story in DNA newspaper](#) on the public lecture. An article on it was syndicated in [yahoo news](#), [sify news](#), etc.

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AKR delivering the lecture