

# New Brooms and Old

## Sweeping Up Corruption in India, One Law at a Time

by Aradhana Sharma

Arvind Kejriwal is an anti-corruption crusader in India whose technomoral mission is to transform governance through the law, rendering it transparent, noncorrupt, and participatory. He was actively involved in the fight for the Right to Information Act, which became law in 2005. Dissatisfied with the workings of this law, however, Kejriwal organized the India Against Corruption movement to demand a new anti-corruption bill, which failed to pass. This essay focuses on the public discourse on corruption in the wake of the Right to Information Act and the India Against Corruption movement, and it puts law-focused anti-corruption strategies under critical scrutiny. I reveal the difficulty in delimiting corruption as well as the limits of the law in tackling it. A lack of consensus over what counts as real corruption and where its source lies complicates legal remedies. Indeed, as I argue, the law and corruption are inverted mirrors of each other. Where one is a symbol of rationalized modernity, the other reflects its dangerous underside; where one extends a formal economy of rules, the other refers to unruly practices of rule bending. Corruption transgresses and questions the very dualisms—public and private, state and society—that liberal law embodies. If the law produces corruption as a constitutive outside of the modern order, then using laws to dismantle corruption becomes a paradoxical undertaking that is bound to fail at its limits.

### Cleaning the Filth

Corruption is a messy social practice, full of gray areas, which makes it difficult to study and to root out through the use of laws alone. While many in India (and elsewhere) accept corruption as a truism, they do not agree on its spatial borders, its “systemic” nature, or its beginning and end. Where some see it as a state disease that seeps into society, others view it as a wider cultural malaise that gets reflected in state institutions. Defining what counts as real corruption and who its true perpetrators and victims are is tricky (de Sardan 1999). Exceptions abound. Formally legal acts may be disparaged as immoral and antisocial, and illegal ones may well be seen as necessary and socially tolerable (Gupta 2012; Scott 1969). And then there are those who argue that corruption is not the real problem; that political, economic, and social inequality lie at the root of it; and that inequality is what should be tackled, not corruption per se.

The lack of consensus about what corruption is, what it does, and the kind of threat that it poses to society complicates any easy legal resolution. And yet, that is precisely how some Indian activists, led by Arvind Kejriwal, have approached the

issue. When I first met Kejriwal and his associates in 2008, they were ardent advocates of India’s Right to Information Act (RTI), which attempts to make governance transparent and noncorrupt. But 3 years later, they shifted tactics. Arguing that the RTI alone could not end corruption and that India needed a tougher law, they launched one of the largest social movements in recent Indian history in 2011—the India Against Corruption (IAC) campaign—to fight for a new anti-corruption law.

To undo the limits of one law—the RTI, which came into force in 2005—with a more perfect law—the *Jan Lokpal*, or People’s Ombuds bill—to end state graft sounds awkwardly circular. But it captures well Kejriwal’s political strategy, which positions the law as the best means to engender systemic transformation. It also invites some questions, which I take up in this essay to critically examine the judicialized anti-corruption activism of which Kejriwal is a key example. First, if corruption is a systemic breakdown, then which system needs amending—the state, society, culture, or something else? Second, how is corruption defined and who is to blame for it? And finally, what are the constraints of uprooting corruption through the law?

The law and corruption, as situated social fields, are inverted mirrors of each other, deeply intertwined and co-constitutive: the one is a symbol of rationalized liberal modernity and the other a symbol of its dangerous, unwieldy underside. The law embodies and protects the public-private binary and the related state-society, formal-informal distinctions that constitute modern liberal state power; it also produces corruption as a criminal contamination of these sacrosanct divides. As trans-

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gressive in-betweenness, corruption reveals the lived miscegenation of categories that ought to be separate but are not so in practice (Gupta 2012).<sup>1</sup> It threatens to expose how the state functions not as an ideal public democratic realm but as a privatized public propped up by a stupefying maze of rules and procedures that must be bent in order to make the system work, as Shiv Visvanathan (2008) has argued. Corruption scrambles the rationalized onstage face of modern state practices by revealing their messy backstage, and laws become the preferred mechanism to contain this danger.<sup>2</sup>

But ending corruption through the law is deeply paradoxical, as I elaborate in this essay. If the law needs and produces corruption as its constitutive outside, then can the law—even a more perfect law—be relied upon to eradicate it? In invoking “the law” here, I am not referencing an abstract or static system; rather, I am invoking the modern classificatory and binary logic of the law.<sup>3</sup> Where this logic requires precision, categorizing acts as unequivocally good or bad, legal or illegal, corruption resists such simplification and straightjacketing. If the law is a formal economy of rules, corruption signals the bending of those rules. In India and elsewhere, corruption exists not because there are insufficient laws and rules but because of their teeming overabundance. More laws only inflate an already absurd and convoluted maze of state regulations and rules and open new loopholes for subversion. They also lead to a bureaucratization of social and activist life: deciphering and negotiating ever-expanding procedures, writing petitions, and appealing to the state become (liberal) ends in themselves, as I have argued elsewhere (Sharma 2013). Indeed, a technocratic anti-corruption strategy perpetuates an enduring faith in the state, the law, and bureaucratic proceduralism as neutral and good. Legal and administrative reforms amount to changing state institutions without offering a nuanced structural critique of the state or of bureaucratic rationality as power-laden, gendered, and classed phenomena.

This essay is an ethnography of the public discourse on corruption in the wake of the RTI and the IAC campaign. I draw upon interviews, observations, and media commentaries that took place between 2008 and 2014 in Delhi, juxtaposing ethnographic vignettes that offer different takes on corruption:

1. Dipesh Chakrabarty (1992) and Sudipta Kaviraj (1997) discuss the problematic nature of the conceptual distinction between public and private spaces in colonial India, which the state tried to police and manage through policies, laws, and rules.

2. Lars Buur (2001), discussing the workings of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, reveals the bureaucratic work that goes into maintaining the apparent separation of the onstage and backstage, the visible and invisible, and the public and private.

3. The social actors in my ethnography also insisted upon the black-and-white logic of the law. Even when they disagreed on the interpretations and usages of specific laws, they agreed about its underlying “spirit” and force as a precise system that is meant to classify right and wrong in a dualistic manner. In this essay, I follow my informants’ lead in my use of “the law” in terms of its binary logic.

where it exists, who is to blame, and how to tackle it.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, I suggest that such juxtaposition offers a powerful methodology for studying contentious social issues, like corruption, which defy consensus. It allows me to tease out the messy indeterminacy that colors the public discourse about corruption and the limitation, even impossibility, of cleansing the system with the law (see Pardo 2018 and Smart 2018). My analysis, in reflecting the matter at hand, does not seek neatness or closure, as the spirit of the law would dictate. Moreover, like other authors in this volume of *Current Anthropology*, I am interested in approaching corruption in its everydayness and productivity while keeping in view the structural inequalities that produce such acts and are often propped up by laws.

Although my focus in this essay is contemporary India, corruption is neither a “new” problem nor a solely Indian one.<sup>5</sup> Global development institutions, like the World Bank, define it as a menace to “good governance” and rank countries on the basis of an apparently standardized metric of venality. That postcolonial and postsocialist countries rank lower on these indexes is unsurprising given that they are also considered imperfectly modern when measured by Western benchmarks that pass as “universals” (Chakrabarty 2000; Merry 2011; Tidey 2018).<sup>6</sup> Social movements fighting locally to end corruption cannot avoid articulating with the globally dominant language of “good governance” purveyed by powerful international institutions (Abrahamsen 2000). The story I tell here, then, is at once specific to India and translocal. It is also a gendered one. The actors in the vignettes I narrate below are mostly men who seem to offer neutral analyses: since everyone is affected by corruption, there is apparently no need to discuss who encounters it, how, or why. Corruption is a masculinist discourse not only because privileged voices define the terms on which the “problem” is debated but also because of the troubled nature of the public-private boundary that overdetermines the issue; this binary, which also lies at the heart of liberal law, has been profoundly consequential for gendered lives (Brown 1995; MacKinnon 1989; Menon 2004; Sunder Rajan 2003). Discussions about corrup-

4. My research project began in 2008 as an examination of the social life of the RTI in poor and middle-class neighborhoods in Delhi. But as the main group of activists I was following altered their political focus, organization, and strategy—from a pro-transparency NGO to an anti-corruption social movement to a political party—my ethnographic ground also shifted. I followed this core group until 2014, after they had transformed from activists to elected officials in Delhi.

5. In the case of India, Nicholas Dirks (2006) argues that state corruption—“scandal”—was essential to colonial rule. Low-paid functionaries routinely indulged in private commerce and extractive financial deals to supplement their salaries and to ascend to positions of power. Top officials were also deeply implicated in corruption, as the impeachment trial of Warren Hastings revealed.

6. India currently shares the 76th position with Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brazil, Zambia, and others on Transparency International’s index (<http://www.transparency.org/cpi2015#results-table>; accessed January 7, 2017).

tion and legal reforms, thus, cannot be extricated from the patriarchal logic of liberal state power.

Since public debates about corruption in the context of the RTI and the IAC campaign lie at the heart of my ethnography, and because Arvind Kejriwal is associated with both, I begin by contextualizing his political trajectory. I then juxtapose different perspectives on corruption, highlighting the disagreements over its source and over the kinds of acts that count as truly venal. These contentions lead me to ruminate on the limits of the law in ending corruption.

### A Morphing Politics

A bureaucrat-turned-activist-turned-politician, Kejriwal is a man with a technomoral mission (Bornstein and Sharma 2016): for him, eradicating corruption and sweeping governance clean is a moral imperative best achieved through technocratic, legal remedies. He offers a model of the sort of judicialized anti-corruption politics that I put under critical scrutiny in this essay: it is one that expresses an enduring faith in the law as mechanism for rationalizing governance.<sup>7</sup>

When I first met him in 2008, Arvind, as everyone addressed Kejriwal then, was a transparency advocate running *Parivartan*, a nongovernmental organization (NGO)-like body<sup>8</sup> that promoted public awareness and use of the RTI. The product of a protracted 15-year grassroots struggle,<sup>9</sup> the RTI promised to reverse the opacity and unaccountability that had defined governance since colonial times. By unlocking public access to the archive of state records, this law sought to promote clean, noncorrupt, and good governance. But barely 3 years after its passage, Arvind, who had helped draft the RTI, seemed dissatisfied with its functioning.

"The RTI law does not seem to be working," he told me one October afternoon in 2008, as we sat in Indian Coffee House, popularly known as an activist "*adda*," or den. "We have a great RTI Act, but officials are not giving information. They are not scared of the RTI act." I nodded, having observed how state representatives subverted transparency (Sharma 2013). Officials rejected RTI petitions and appeals on spurious grounds. They delayed responses or sent responses that were essentially illegible, written as they were in coded "bureaucratese" that is hard for anyone but experts to comprehend. They were also altering documentary practices so as to render transparency meaningless: instead of recording departmental deliberations

7. Comaroff and Comaroff note the "judicialization of politics" (2006: 26) across postcolonial and postsocialist worlds because of neoliberal reforms that promote rule by law and liberal democracy. For how this is unfolding in India, see Randeria and Grunder (2009) and Bornstein and Sharma (2016).

8. Parivartan was not registered as an NGO but was perceived as one by the media and public.

9. The campaign for information freedom was led by the *Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan* (Worker Peasant Power Collective), a grassroots group in Rajasthan.

about projects in writing and initialing their opinions, as they are supposed to do, some officials were writing opinions on removable sticky notes or discussing projects over the telephone to preserve their anonymity.<sup>10</sup> By thus manipulating the contents of files, these officials were thwarting the transparency law: no written record meant no information and no person to hold accountable for bad decisions and corrupt acts. At the same time, however, the RTI was quite effective in helping the poor get subsidized food, schooling, and other entitlements that they had been unable to access earlier because of misinformation and "leakages." Many RTI NGOs, including Arvind's Parivartan, were facilitating just these sorts of successes. So why did he seem disheartened with the RTI?

Arvind broke my reverie, as if on cue:

"RTI is a *behtareen* [excellent] tool. It is necessary but not sufficient for changing the system. Even if RTI works, it is just one small part. . . . If money has been siphoned off or there is corruption, [RTI] exposes all that. What do I do with that information? You make a complaint to the vigilance agencies, to the Central Bureau of Investigation, to the police, to the chief minister, to the president, to the prime minister. No action is taken. . . . RTI just gives information. That's all. That is not a guarantee that the system will work better. So that brings us to the larger issues of what ails governance. What comes out is that the ordinary citizen, in his [sic] day-to-day functioning, has no control over governance. And this is not democracy. It is a sham. [For] real change . . . you need better understanding of our system, and you need a different campaign altogether."

The desire for a "different campaign" led Kejriwal to organize the IAC movement in 2011, which took a technomoral approach to expunging the "biggest evil"<sup>11</sup> facing India through a new anti-corruption law: the Jan Lokpal bill sought to establish a powerful suprapstate agency to punish graft, purify governance, and thus save the nation. After organizing protests and public discussions and negotiating over a draft law with the ruling Congress Party-led government for over a year, the IAC disbanded in August 2012 because the government refused to approve the campaign's proposed anti-corruption law. Kejriwal chose to enter the electoral fray. In November 2012, he founded the *Aam Aadmi* (Common Man) Party (AAP), calling it a "political revolution" (News X 2012) that would "change

10. This was the controversy over "file notings." Put in place by the British, file notings document the work flow within a government department on its various projects, recording the opinions of various functionaries, deliberations, and final decisions. The bureaucratic establishment argued that, since notings record "internal" state decision-making, they should not be made public. Activists countered that state transparency and accountability would be meaningless without these records—the public would not know who to hold responsible for bad decisions. In the end, officialdom was forced to share file notings but found ways to subvert this requirement (see Sharma 2013).

11. <http://www.aamadmiparty.org/why-are-we-entering-politics> (accessed July 5, 2016).

the current corrupt and self-serving system of politics forever.”<sup>12</sup> Represented by the symbol of the broom, the AAP contested and won Delhi state elections twice. It debuted as part of a coalition government in December 2013, but its reign was short-lived: the AAP resigned after 49 days because it failed to pass its signature antigraft bill. Its second victory came in February 2015, when the party won 67 out of 70 seats. Kejriwal, now reinstalled as the chief minister of the state, led the Delhi legislature to pass a new anti-corruption bill in late 2015. The central government’s Home Ministry, however, has yet to approve this bill.<sup>13</sup>

### Taking It from the Top: Fix Governance!

*[C]orruption is a crime of calculation, not passion. . . . Combating corruption, therefore, begins with designing better systems.* (Klitgaard 1998:4)

“There are two forms of corruption, mutual and extortionist” Kejriwal told me one morning, in his usual rapid-fire, no-nonsense style. It was July 2009, and we sat in his office, trying to have a conversation amid all sorts of interruptions. “Mutual is when the giver and receiver are both happy and no one says anything. [It is] generally related to corporations vying for government contracts. Extortionist is when people have to pay bribes to get legitimate work done.” Kejriwal saw the latter—retail corruption—as more rampant than the “big ticket” type, and also dangerous. “Almost every single individual in this country is turning corrupt. The entire psyche of the nation is turning corrupt,” he claimed. What accounted for people turning versus being corrupt? “The system is corrupt, not people. Nobody is born corrupt. They are made corrupt.” And what was this system? Neither family nor society nor education, but administrative and elected state structures. In a published interview, Kejriwal stated:

Till now, in this country, we have not paid any attention to governance systems. . . . There are very small departments in the government with less than . . . 200 people. And even some of them are corrupt. You have the Delhi Metro which has more than 7,000 people, but it is performing very well. Why? It is not that E. Sreedharan [Managing Director] sits on each and every person’s head; it is because he has developed the right kind of systems. . . . [M]any of [the] officers in Delhi Metro come on deputation from the railways. When they come to Delhi Metro, they behave properly. I think we need to talk of the right kind of systems, and it is precisely these systems that we are attempting to put in place through the Jan Lokpal bill. . . . [I]t is the system that will govern the character and the performance of the people. (Bhatt 2011)

Kejriwal often used the metro as a model of an exceptional bureaucracy—well-organized and efficiently run. E. Sreedharan had designed a good metro system, which automatically produced disciplined, responsible subjects (Barry, Osborne, and Rose 1996; Foucault 1991) and deterred corruption. Systems were good or bad, not people; people, it seemed, simply acted out internalized systems, or “habitus” in a Bourdieuan sense (1998). Hence the solution to corruption had to be a technomoral one: implementing a rationalized institutional system across state bureaucracies that induced ethical behavior.

My friend Jaydeep, a senior civil servant, disagreed with Kejriwal and the IAC’s framing of corruption as a disease primarily afflicting the state. People who supply milk diluted with water and autorickshaw drivers who charge more than the metered fare, he claimed, were all corrupt. And these were some of the very *aam aadmis*, or ordinary people, that IAC claimed to speak for. So why single out government institutions as corrupt?

I posed this question to Kamal, a twentysomething migrant from Bihar who had quit his job to join the IAC movement in 2012: why should anti-corruption efforts aimed at *vyavastha parivartan*, or systemic change, focus solely on the state? “Because everyone knows that all *netas* [political leaders] are thieves and the main orders come from above,” he responded plainly. Kamal recalled the billions lost in the 2G, Commonwealth Games, and mining scams, in which state and corporate actors were implicated. “Our system is rotten. There is too much corruption.” But what about commonplace bribing? I pushed: “We all do it, no?” He nodded. “It is partly our own fault. When someone asks for a bribe, we give it. Arvind told us that we should ‘introspect’ about that.” I cut in: “Okay. But how would you respond to people who allege that the milk sellers and autorickshaw drivers who scam the public are corrupt?” Now Shalini, another IAC participant who was listening to my conversation with Kamal, chimed in. “If you ask the milk seller why he mixes water with milk, he will tell you, ‘Inflation has increased so much; what am I to do?’ Autorickshaw drivers face the same problem. It is the government, after all, that passes the budget.” In Shalini’s perspective, liberalization-oriented state policies compelled ordinary people to cheat in order to survive. These people were victims of a system over which they had no control, and their transgressions were therefore forgivable. Kamal agreed with Shalini: “*Oopar se hi main hai* [The main corruption is at the top]. It forms a chain, from the top to the bottom,” he said, making a gesture with his hands to indicate a downward flow. “That is why corruption is increasing down here [in society].” He called politicians, located at the head of the chain, “a breed unto themselves . . . [with] no fear of repercussions”; a strong anti-corruption law was meant to cultivate just such a fear. “But these politicians have emerged from society, haven’t they, like you and me?” I probed further. “*Bilkul* [absolutely],” answered Kamal. “However, Arvind says that the ‘chair’ [*kursi*] is so powerful that it corrupts anyone who sits in it.” Even students active in radical politics during the 1970s turned corrupt when they entered government agencies

12. <http://www.aamaadmiiparty.org/why-are-we-entering-politics> (accessed July 5, 2016).

13. The AAP has accused the Narendra Modi-led central government of subverting and disabling the governance of Delhi (Ashraf 2016).

and occupied seats of power, Kamal reminded me. “We need an efficient system, which has controls, checks, and balances; then people will change automatically.”

The IAC members used words like “top,” the “chair,” and the “system” to discursively construct the state as the fountainhead of venality, whose vertical authoritativeness (Ferguson and Gupta 2002) was compromised by immorality. Skilled and honest men who understood the system had to stop the venom at the top through legal measures. This was the technomoral “good governance” project of the IAC and later AAP.

By defining corruption in a state-centric manner, Kejriwal and his associates were able to turn an apparently undifferentiated “India” against corruption: an outraged nation opposed to a venal state. In addition to undertaking the technical task of drafting a new anti-corruption law, movement leaders also used a variety of moral tactics. They deployed religious symbols depicting the nation—“Mother India”—as a Hindu goddess whose sanctity had to be protected from degeneracy. They borrowed liberally from the Gandhian repertoire, undertaking hunger strikes and calling their mobilization a *satyagraha* for *swaraj*—a truth-based struggle for self-rule (Sharma 2014). They helped shape a cross-class “intimate public” (Berlant 2008) around the shared experience of corruption that rendered everyone equally ordinary as victims of corruption. One person’s story of suffering at the hands of an unethical state system was every person’s story: “any man [became] everyman in [this] ritual of politics” (Visvanathan 2011). The victimized everyman was exhorted to join the virtuous battle led by Gandhian experts to root out the rot in government and save India. This battle, moreover, was presented as nonideological. As Kejriwal openly declared, “We are not wedded to any ideology. We are basically aam aadmis. We have problems. . . . We just want solutions to our problems” (Kejriwal 2013). If the daily problems of the public could not be reduced to ideology, neither could their solutions. Governance reform was a technical task impelled by moral righteousness and not an issue of right versus left politics.<sup>14</sup> Period.

Although the ruling government did not pass the IAC’s Jan Lokpal bill, it agreed with the basic idea that ending corruption required a top-down legal approach. Manmohan Singh, then prime minister of India, proposed amending the existing Prevention of Corruption Act, 1988, as an alternative, which the IAC had declared too weak. The law, asserted Singh, required a “clear and unambiguous definition for the term ‘corruption,’ covering both the supply and demand sides” and had to address the issue of “consensual bribery [where] the supplier of the bribe goes scot free. . . . We need to ensure that even while the corrupt are relentlessly pursued and brought to book, the innocent are not harassed.”<sup>15</sup> Singh’s framing of corruption as

a demand and supply problem needing precise definition in order to be legally tackled was not surprising given his experience as an economist and a technocrat. The trouble, however, is that corruption eludes such absolute delimitation and clear-cut winners and losers. At issue is not simply whether supply and demand should be treated the same but also what forms of bribe giving and taking count as truly corrupt and what forms are considered reasonable and excusable. And this is not easy to determine.

An RTI activist told me that, as “controlled activity,” corruption is not a problem: it may not be fair, but it is socially and legally tolerated (Gupta 2012). He gave me an example. A junior engineer, a government employee, is taught to expect “envelopes” full of bribes each month in addition to his salary. But he is also expected to “do the right thing”: that is, buy materials that might be “a bit substandard but not so bad that a bridge might fall. That would be unacceptable.” Otherwise, the bribe-taking engineer would not be seen as a criminal.

Kejriwal also acknowledged the thorniness of classifying acts as corrupt during an NDTV (New Delhi Television) show in November 2012 where he appeared alongside his then-associate Prashant Bhushan, prominent RTI campaigner Shekhar Singh, and public intellectual Pratap Bhanu Mehta (NDTV 2012). When the program anchor, Barkha Dutt, questioned Kejriwal about his party’s criticism of big business, the latter responded, “We have never said that corporates are bad. . . . If you try to subvert the system and make gains by indulging in corruption. . . . that is bad.” Prashant Bhushan endorsed this view: “What I am against [is] . . . crony capitalism . . . where some large corporates have become so huge by virtue of bribing [for] illicit gains.” But, he added,

I believe that most corporations are also the victims of corruption. When Kaushik Basu<sup>16</sup> said that the bribe giver should not be penalized . . . there was a half-truth in that. If the bribe giver is giving a bribe in order to get a legal entitlement, [such as] a common person who gives a bribe to get his ration card or his driving license [or] a corporate who gives a bribe merely to maintain his license . . . which [the government] is threatening to cancel illegally, they are the victims of corruption because they are . . . being forced to give a bribe in order to get their legal right.

Shekhar Singh added another “class of people” to Bhushan’s the list of victims: Fair Price Shop owners, who are licensed by the state to sell subsidized food rations and kerosene oil to those living below the poverty line. “A ration shop owner who gets seven *paise* [commission] on his kerosene . . . can’t run his shop [and] is forced into taking things, which are technically not his entitlement because you create [such] systems.

14. This resonates with Chantal Mouffe’s (2005) argument that politics today unfolds around moral struggles between right and wrong rather than ideological contests between left and right parties and groups.

15. He said this during a speech at the 19th Conference of Central Bureau of Investigation and State Anti-corruption Bureaux on October 10,

2012. <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/erelease.aspx?relid=88292> (accessed March 10, 2014).

16. Kaushik Basu, a former chief economic advisor, argued that giving bribes should be decriminalized, whereas accepting them should remain illegal (Basu 2011).

There are a whole lot of people who . . . are giving bribes for their entitlements [because] they . . . don't have real options."

As I watched this debate on television, I recalled meeting a ration shop owner at the Delhi Consumer Court in 2009 against whom Kejriwal had filed a lawsuit for defrauding customers by not opening the store regularly and cheating on the quantity and quality of food rations. This man was one among several defendants, but he believed that, unlike the others, he was not dishonest. Pointing to the fact that only one customer had lodged a complaint against him, he asserted that the case against him was not justified. "I am not corrupt! One should consider the qualities of a human being before taking legal action against them. I have to marry off three daughters!" he said, wringing his hands in desperation. "It is very difficult to manage with low commission rates." This ration shop owner saw himself as a morally upstanding person who was an unfortunate victim of a system that left him no choice but to cheat (and "mildly," at that) in order to survive and fulfill his social obligations.

What counts as corruption, then, eludes clarity—exceptions abound.<sup>17</sup> Bribe givers are not considered immoral to the extent that they have to pay money to access their rights and entitlements. And cheaters, like the bridge engineer and ration shop owners, are seen as honest casualties of an unruly system, cogs in an "evil"-generating, dysfunctional wheel.<sup>18</sup> Daily survival in this chaotic, encumbered system of governance by milk sellers or autorickshaw drivers or ration shopkeepers becomes a narrative of helplessness and oppression rather than "play"—a creative bending, even rescripting, of indecipherable bureaucratic rules (Visvanathan 2008).

In the abovementioned NDTV program, Pratap Bhanu Mehta concurred with the sentiment that most people "are victims in the sense that, over the years, the Indian state has created such a labyrinthine structure that it has become very difficult at the individual level for people to be honest all the time." But anchor Barkha Dutt was more skeptical: "This society that all of us are a part of, they [sic] are not victims necessarily." She described how people routinely evade taxes and conduct real estate deals in black money, and she connected rampant corruption with the public's "*chalta hai* [anything goes] attitude." I now turn to the view that corruption is a cultural malaise.

### Cultural Pathology or a Tragedy of Our Mentality

*People washed, changed, slept and even urinated and defecated out in the open. . . . To this Indian "chaos" was opposed the immaculate "order" of the European quarters.* (Chakrabarty 1992:541)

17. This has also been noted by de Sardan 1999.

18. Although the ration sellers that I spoke to saw themselves as nonagentic, blameless cogs in an unjust bureaucratic machine, I invoke "evil" here in the sense used by Hannah Arendt in her discussion of Adolf Eichmann's trial (Arendt 1963): banal but conscious and not innocent.

Responding critically to the IAC campaign, Anuj Chopra (2011) called corruption in India "a deeply engrained cultural neurosis that exists on every level of society," which needed a better cure than the simplistic belief that "ferreting out crooked politicians alone will bring about a cataclysmic change." Rather than focus on state corruption, Chopra shone light on "private corruption"—people selling their votes in exchange for cash and other handouts or paying bribes for low-paying government jobs because of the potential for extra income. The "tacit approval of private corruption," wrote Chopra (2011), "is common across India's social classes. . . . The Lokpal bill, if it works, might take down a few corrupt politicians. But the battle to slay corruption begins at home."

The idea that corruption is a cultural epidemic, propagated in the private recesses of society, is reminiscent of the "culture of poverty" thesis, which blames the poor for reproducing their poverty and deficient values from one generation to the next, rather than seriously engaging political and economic histories and structures.<sup>19</sup> Chopra similarly claimed that, far from being innocent casualties of corruption, Indians were active participants in perpetuating this filth. The masses and the classes all needed a thorough washing.

Chopra's lament about corruption as cultural dirt can be read as a "modernist complaint" (Chakrabarty 1992:542), a ruining of India's incomplete, "not-quite" quality of modernity. It brings to mind colonial governmentality: public hygiene projects, for example, which aimed to change dirty cultural habits and to create clean and governable colonial subjects and spaces.<sup>20</sup> It also conjures developmentalism, which reads India's deep-rooted culture of corruption as backwardness and as a symbol of polluted, even rogue, modernity. But rather than advocate for top-down statist policies or laws to rationalize society and cultivate modern values and civic citizenship, Chopra advocated for moral uplift through private civil-society programs. He highlighted *ipaidabribe.com*, an initiative that asks bribe givers to confess their transgressions to an online public. In the act of truth telling—how much they paid and to whom—they exonerate themselves, raise awareness, and help others, who can potentially avoid making the same mistake.

I met someone else who offered a similar "culturalist" perspective on corruption and raised doubts about the effectiveness of the law in curbing it. Ramesh Singh, a mid-level government official, was the designated public information officer (PIO) for his department in 2009, responsible for answering all information requests filed under the RTI.<sup>21</sup> We had spoken

19. This phrase was coined by Oscar Lewis (1969) and became an important mantra guiding antipoverty programs, including in the United States.

20. Anderson (1995), Chakrabarty (1992), and Kaviraj (1997) discuss colonial public hygiene projects.

21. Information commissioners have the power to penalize any PIO 250 rupees (roughly US\$4) per day up to a maximum of 25,000 rupees for wrongfully withholding or destroying information or giving incomplete or incorrect information.

over the telephone, and he agreed to talk to me after making sure that I was not from the media (his boss had prohibited him from speaking to the media). I foolishly decided to drive to the interview. Frustrated by Delhi's notorious traffic and distracted by Singh's text message telling me that I was late, I missed the final turn that would have brought me to my destination. I pulled over, dreading the long loop I would be forced to take as a result of my mistake. When an onlooker suggested that I could reverse into the street leading to Singh's office, I complied willingly, going the wrong way on a one-way street for about 25 feet. The onlooker even guided me, ensuring that my illegal maneuver would go smoothly.

Now 15 minutes late, I was shown to a room where two men sat. The man on the telephone waved me to a sofa, while the other barely glanced up from his desk. This government office was as banal as any other I had seen. Fluorescent lighting. Steel cabinets. Dull furniture. Impersonal, askew paraphernalia on white walls, including a dry erase board with alphanumeric codes that made no sense to me. And stacks of files. The only thing personal in that room was a picture of Sai Baba, an Indian holy man. But before I could consider which of the two officials in the room was a devotee, the man on the telephone hung up. "Ramesh Singh," he said, walking over to where I sat. Aware of my interest in the RTI, he launched right into a monologue about transparency, corruption, laws, and the system:

The intention of the RTI act is very good: transparency, accountability, and decreasing corruption. It is in the interest of democracy. It has increased the role of the public in the form of participation. But, in order to participate properly in a democracy—make the right electoral choices, understand policies, judge if elected representatives are doing the right thing—a citizen needs to be educated [and] informed. The general public is unaware and therefore unempowered. Ninety-five percent usage of the RTI law is wrong. It is self-interested. Blackmailers misuse it.

He talked to me about reporters who ask PIOs for records and then threaten to expose governmental wrongdoing unless they are paid off and about people with "vested interests" who make PIOs party to cases that they file in court using information they get from RTI petitions. People have an axe to grind with each other, and the "PIOs are the ones who get caught in the middle," Singh lamented. "Another big problem is that RTI petitions are not clear. There is confusion over whether applicants are asking questions or asking for information." "Umm, what is the difference between the two?" I queried. "Take *mailee* [dirty] Yamuna," piped in Singh. "Let's say someone asks how much pollution has been created in the Yamuna river: how much acid, alkali, garbage, and sewage. That is a vague and huge question! You see, PIOs are not supposed to generate information, but only share existing information. Public awareness is a major obstacle. But government officials are also afraid of getting sued if awareness increases. People in the US," said Singh, eyeing me pointedly, "regularly sue the government over

public works and damages." "So are state officials against the RTI law? Or do they support it?" I asked. Singh smiled wryly.

What sort of support can you expect from a person who feels bound [*bandha hua*] and obligated to reveal information. Something that was his privilege is no longer his. He feels attacked. When someone files an RTI application, [this officer] reacts: 'Who does he think he is [*Iski aukat kya hai!*]?' How dare he question me!' Only a 'reasonable' officer will be supportive of the law—that is just 2% of all officials. Others are not taking it in the right spirit. They are forced to give information now. They don't want to do it from their heart [*dil se*].

Singh, however, was willing to cut these reluctant officers some slack, musing that perhaps they were not at fault, that the blame ought to be placed elsewhere. "You see, every system has positive and negative aspects, and these things affect the people who are part of the system. I will tell you about a Japanese man who came to work with us for a year. He was trained to be a 'model citizen,' who did not dirty his surroundings. He even flicked ash in his cigarette case!" My eyes widened and he nodded, expecting exactly that reaction. "But after one year of living in Delhi, he had no compunction about urinating in public!" Singh laughed loudly and went on to speak about people who do not spit in their own homes but have no problem with spitting in public places. "*Log gandhi cheez mein gand dalte hain.*" Dirt begets dirt; a dirty environment invites filthy behavior. "Our system is like that," he concluded.

Which dirty system was Singh referencing, I wondered. Was he echoing the part-critical, part-celebratory local discourse that India is corrupt but that is just the way things are, the "anything goes" attitude that Barkha Dutt had pointed to on NDTV? Or was it something else? Singh interrupted my rumination by declaring, "There is a general disrespect for laws here." I squirmed, recalling my "minor" traffic violation that morning. "Even the Supreme Court's directions are not obeyed." Converting cabs and autorickshaws to natural gas or getting people to abide by the seat belt law presented challenges, he reminded me, and the transparency law was no different. "People know about their rights but hardly anyone knows about duties listed in article 51(A) of the constitution. That," he paused for effect, "is the tragedy of our mentality. We need public awareness and education. Government awareness is also needed. But see, politics is a reflection of society. Society changes and so does politics."

There was some convergence between Singh's ideas and the IAC's perspective that "the system" shapes individual behavior. But the system that needed changing, for Singh, was not the state so much as society. In his understanding, society cradled the state, blurring easy above-below, inside-outside, clean-dirty distinctions, especially where morality was concerned. The values nurtured in society were mirrored in the state: disrespect for public spaces and the law and a lack of civic sense, for instance. Corruption as a social problem could not be resolved by passing laws or targeting the state alone. The

need of the hour was to change the hearts and minds of the public and officialdom. And cultivating civic values and citizenship—like the Japanese—required a moral education in duties and obligations as social facts rather than abstract legal ones. As Singh pointed out, technocratic legal appeals would not go very far in a context where people commonly subverted laws.

### Breaking the Faith

I finally introduce Sumit, who took Singh's skepticism of the law's capability to correct governance away from culturalist arguments and toward a structural critique. For Sumit, state transparency and corruption, to the extent that they were issues at all, spoke to deeper hierarchies and oppression. "No law is going to change structural inequality," he stated plainly, as if it were a truth as tangible as the feel of our skins. He offered a nuanced take on judicialized activism, emphasizing powerfully what I call the liberal limit of the law—its inability to deliver radical transformation of the kind Kejriwal had promised.

I encountered Sumit by chance at the cafeteria at the Alliance Française in Delhi, where the journalist I was supposed to interview brought him along. He sat at our table, slurping on a bowl of steaming Maggie noodles, listening to our conversation about NGOs and law-based activism, and piping in from time to time. His sporadic commentary was delivered with a deadpan obviousness that I had come to expect from activists involved in peoples' movements and radical politics. I was intrigued. Sumit and I met a few days later at my request at a venue he chose: a roadside *dhaba*, or food stall, near the Delhi University campus. He placed his "usual" chai order with the *dhaba-wallah*—he was a regular—while I specified, "no sugar, please." We sat under a *Gulmohar* tree, on fire with its spring-time red blossoms. I took out my recorder, Sumit lit his first cigarette, and we began discussing transparency, corruption, and the upswing in judicialized politics.

His main issue with law-based projects of change was that they lacked a critique of the state. Such projects conveyed the belief that all that was needed was "a knowledgeable person, who knew everything about procedures and laws, [and whom] no one would be able to fool. That means that there is nothing wrong with [the state]. If you have a good person, he [sic] will make everything right." Kejriwal certainly appeared as such a messianic figure to me.

Judicialized politics also enthroned the law as the main site and force of transformation. Although Sumit did not trivialize activists' growing reliance on the law, he refused to see it as a magic bullet.

Pro-people and left forces should use the law as a space, but one should not be under the illusion that this is going to make a radical change in society. How are all these laws going to affect the feudal mind-set, or the patriarchal mind-set, or Brahminical ideology? I think those are the basic problems of Indian society—feudalism, patriarchy, capitalism. See, one

has to understand what the system is. The system has a kind of class and gender logic that cannot be cleaned up by laws. You need total abolition of the caste system and patriarchy in society. You need a radical restructuring of property relations, in old-fashioned socialist terms.

Sumit offered a different understanding of "the system," one that was limited neither to the state, writ large, nor culture with a capital C, even as he emphasized the limits of the law in changing this system. I pushed him on this point. Were those who believed in the grand promise of the RTI simply wrong? This law, after all, was supposed to bring about a sea change in governance—instituting transparency and accountability and ending corruption. Sumit chuckled.

It is not that easy that you get a law and you get access to everything. I don't think transparency is a problem. Today's modern state is very complex. We have an extremely centralized state with a very sophisticated intelligence apparatus—a state within the state. If the state becomes totally transparent, so what! The inherently exploitative apparatus will stay there as is. The police will still shoot you. But now they will say, 'Okay, I am shooting you.' To put it more bluntly, supposing capitalism becomes transparent. So what! A person will say, 'Okay, I'm transparent and I am exploiting you legally.' But does it answer the structural exploitation in society? Capitalism needs the state to enforce contracts and to maintain law and order and to repress any possible rebellion. Supposing that state becomes totally honest and efficient and transparent. People may get some administrative relief, and in a class society, that counts. Because the way our bureaucrats behave—it is a feudal country, a decadent corrupt society. So naturally it will make things slightly better for the people. But I don't think the exploitative system is going to go away.

He paused and took a long drag.

Now, corruption. Corruption is not an issue. India is very famous for corruption. You know, 'the Third World.' Countries which don't have legal corruption—the US, for example—have lobbying, etcetera, etcetera. Do you think those are the perfect nonexploitative societies? No! Take the NREGA [National Rural Employment Guarantee Act].<sup>22</sup> You get all the information through RTI that the NREGA is implemented 100% according to the spirit and letter of the law. So what! You fix a minimum wage of 100 rupees per day. A business executive gets 10,000 rupees per day. Does that mean it is an ideal system? Even if the government implements all its schemes in a transparent and noncorrupt way, are we going to have an egalitarian society only through schemes?

22. Passed in 2005, this "right to livelihood" law guarantees 100 days of paid wage labor per year to households whose adult members are willing to do unskilled work.



Sumit readily admitted that the RTI law was partially successful in providing people with access to information, which is not a mean achievement “in a society with widespread illiteracy and widespread disinformation [spread by] mass media.” But to think that “the law is a magic wand, which will cure all the diseases—therein lies the danger.” I agreed and asked if there was “an alternative to this law-focused politics.” “It is not either-or,” he answered, and then elaborated:

Our system is very corrupt, very callous, so you need some kind of cleaning up mechanism. My problem is one should not create too many illusions about the system, so that all your activists are busy writing petitions. . . . I call it ‘extra-legalism.’ It is depoliticizing people. Like, I’ll tell you my experience. I was part of a radical group in Bihar. I saw that the village health center and the public distribution system were not working. So I started writing petitions. I put in at least half a quintal of petitions to make one village health center, one ration shop work. Nothing happened. The senior members [of my group] laughed at me: ‘You are so stupid. Politics is not petition writing!’ So we found other ways. If a health center was not functioning properly, we would blockade the subdivisional officer’s office for 48 hours. He would come, get the doctor, and get the center opened. This was practical political training for me. But social movement people, morning to evening, write applications—to the executive engineer, to the block development officer. . . . This is the attitude! You put so much faith [in] writing applications [and] knowing everything about procedures and laws. Everyday India gets truckloads of applications. The prime minister’s office has around 25 officers just to reply to these applications! Petitioning should be part of the whole activist process, but not everything. Because ultimately you are strengthening the status quo [and] in the long-term it can be dangerous. Writing applications may help marginalized groups access government programs, but they will always remain marginalized.

I nodded. He took another long drag and blew out smoke, away from my face. “If applications could change a society, then why struggle? Let us give a memorandum to the prime minister for implementing socialism in this country!”

I burst out in raucous laughter. And Sumit joined in.

## A Multiplying Maze

In this essay, I have used Arvind Kejriwal’s trajectory of law-focused technomoral politics and public discussions about corruption in the context of the RTI and the IAC movement in India to think about corruption as limit phenomenon and to consider the limits of the law in wiping it out. Corruption at once transgresses the idealized limit between the public and private realms that firmly undergirds liberal law and defies delimiting. There is avid disagreement in the Indian public sphere about which corrupt system to target, how to separate innocent victims from wrongdoers, and how to distinguish between

“bona fide mistakes and colorable exercise of power,”<sup>23</sup> as the former prime minister, Manmohan Singh, put it. The discourse on corruption teems with gray areas. Legal and social understandings of good and bad, legitimate and illegitimate, do not map neatly onto each other. Exceptions muddle the apparent “rule,” the truism, of corruption.

As a morphing spectrum of social practices, corruption is anything but universal or circumscribable. It confounds the clear boundaries, the “dos and don’ts,” that the modernist logic of the law demands. Mathematical equations, like “ $C = M + D - A$  [or] Corruption equals Monopoly plus Discretion minus Accountability” (Klitgaard 1998:4), and laws based on such precise definitions work well as aesthetic exercises in simplification, in imposing formulaic systematicity on what is “an inherently untidy experience” (Douglas 2002:5). But they ultimately fail to contain the chaotic social life of corruption. For corruption is not an object or a disease agent that can be isolated and attacked; it is rather a shifting “relation between official-unofficial, formal-informal, public-private” (Visvanathan 2008:53) and a proliferating effect of these modern distinctions.

A technical, legalistic approach to eradicating corruption can only go so far before stalling. If corruption “stems from taxonomy, the power to classify and declassify” (Visvanathan 2008:53), then the law, as a key institutional embodiment of the modern will to classify, can hardly be relied upon to cure what, in fact, it generates. New laws will produce new transgressions; exceptions will erupt at the limit of the law and fray its neat seams. These impasses will in turn produce more interpretive wrangling over what is and is not corrupt, ongoing amendments to existing laws, and/or calls for better laws in a never-ending chase for perfection and control.

Perhaps it is not corruption that is a problem, as Sumit suggested, but structural inequality propped up by the state and by laws. What if one considers corruption not as the fallout of a poorly designed system but as the outcome of the logic of modern bureaucracy—the hierarchical and alienating system of formal rules, routines, and relations typified by the state and the law as public institutions—that seeks but fails to rationalize all aspects of social and political life (Weber 1968).

I find Dipesh Chakrabarty’s (1992) analysis of the complexity and polluted nature of the public realm in colonial India to be useful here. He argues that the street and the bazaar functioned not as ordered and civic public arenas but as dangerous spaces; they allowed a muddling of categories—outside/inside, strange/familiar—that should, ideally, remain separate. I suggest that we might want to see the state in a similar way. If we suspend the ideal of the liberal state as a perfectly public, civic, and rule-bound realm, then what we confront is a much more chaotic, even malevolent arena that is partially

23. <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/erelease.aspx?relid=88292> (accessed March 10, 2014).

privatized and unequally accessible. The state-as-is is an unfamiliar realm for most, made up of faceless rules and impenetrable strangers with whom one is forced to transact and haggle. Corruption can be viewed as a way of rendering familiar the strangely alienating terrain of bureaucratic unknowns and incomprehensibles. It vernacularizes the formal “grammar of a bureaucracy” (Visvanathan 2008:55) by using deal making, gifting, and personal relationships to upend abstract impersonalism and rule-boundedness. Corruption, then, is not so much a symptom of a bad system that is imperfectly rationalized but the outcome of the modern bureaucracy itself. Instituting more laws, then, will not only expand an already distended state but also proliferate bureaucratic rules and lifeways that generate corrupt acts in the first place. Dismantling corruption through laws is bound to fail at its limits, as new laws will continue to produce corruption as an unruly excess. Although such laws against corruption might provide temporary relief to some, they will not materialize an equal society.

Maybe by searching for the perfect law to end corruption, construed narrowly, we are deflecting attention from the issue we ought to take seriously. And that is, in Sumit’s words, how to “overturn the anthropology of power” or the ideologies and practices that produce and sustain structural hierarchies and violence, which are at once ensconced in the state and the law and go beyond them.

## Acknowledgments

I thank the Wenner-Gren Foundation, especially Leslie C. Aiello and Laurie Obbink, for organizing the symposium on “The Anthropology of Corruption,” and Sarah Muir and Akhil Gupta for leading such a generative discussion. Valuable feedback from all my co-participants at the symposium and the critical insights of anonymous reviewers were central in sharpening this article’s arguments.

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