

[Bribery: the Poor Man's Extortion](#)

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EDITORIAL

Bribery: the Poor Man's Extortion

Probing the petty monetary muggings that are all-too-common an experience in India

the Editor

Bribery is not india's private province, though she has taken its subtle arts to profound, almost philosophical, depths, as our article on page 17 shows. In fact, many Indians will be startled to hear that we are eclipsed by several nations in this field. A March 29 Reuters report by Rene Pastor of Singapore placed Indonesia at the head of the class as the most corrupt country in all of Asia. In this study, wherein 280 business executives assessed their experiences only in Asia, India came in a dubious second, followed by China, Vietnam and South Korea. Malaysia was ninth, after Taiwan. Had all nations been included, India would have done much worse (or is that better?). A 1995 survey in Berlin tagged Nigeria as the world's worst, followed by Pakistan and Kenya.

Don't despair. The survey was based on the extent that "politically influential individuals were able to arrange matters to their own financial benefit." Had it focused instead on everyday transactions, India would surely have come in

number one. Consider the ticket seller at any bus or train station. You're tired, you need a seat, and they're all sold out. That is until you pony up a pair of Rs.100 notes that go into his back pocket as he deftly hands you a ticket he knew was there all along. You get on the night express. He can buy a new CD for his family. Everyone wins, right?

Wrong. Everyone is diminished by this trivial transaction, which, multiplied millions of times each day, erodes the trust and honesty secure nations and peoples depend on. Graft has a massive impact on an economy, for, we are told, distrust distorts free market mechanisms, depressing prices. Yesterday a Sri Lankan entrepreneur told me of his experience running a telecom company in India. He had offered a bid contract for a government project, but never got a response. Only later did he discover that the clerk who was hired to type and submit it never did so, because no incentive had been offered. Thus a Rs.100 bribe not given cost him a multi-lakh project. The effect is not merely monetary, either. Such payoffs are a form of mugging, without knife or gun, yet engendering a similar sense of being assaulted and psychologically victimized.

To be honest, it is hard to live honestly in India, abstaining from bribes. There are only two ways to get things efficiently done there: through high-level influence or by resorting to payoffs. Without these, progress comes only to the patient and persistent.

It is a damning intimation of how deeply institutionalized graft is in India that the government is considering a law to protect politicians from criminal charges for kick-backs, fraud,

nepotism and the like, essentially giving lawmakers a "do-as-you-please ticket." No wonder Indians are cynical. One leader humorously offered that India should require bribery, making it a law, which then would be dutifully broken by all and sundry, eliminating most payoffs.

The briber's weapons are access and delay. Consider one Indian resident's recent travails, told to me personally. He wanted to install a phone and was assured of a line "within 8 to 10 years time from the date of your application." For an extra (legal) fee of Rs 15 ,000 he was able to get a line in five months. "Finally, one day the lineman came and installed the phone. My happiness lasted a few minutes only. As soon as it was working, the lineman demanded money. I asked why, and he told me that this is normal protocol. I gave him Rs 50. To my surprise, he told me, 'Fifty rupees is not enough.' I grew mad and chased him away. Hours later the line went down. I complained to a friend who asked whether I had 'taken care' of the Junior Engineer at the Exchange. I asked why I should take care of him. My friend said this is the way it works here. I went to the general manager of telecommunications and scolded him. He immediately called up the JE, and the line was connected. But after four days, it was down again." The lineman kept up his harrassment, essentially exacting his own phone fees. He only desisted when a formal complaint was lodged. Similar robberies occur with electricity, gas, customs duty, almost anything. An agricultural inspector refused to open a box of plants for this same man pending a personal contribution of Rs.200, and then assessed another Rs.200 to close it (noting that by law only he can do these tasks).

Need more? A large family arriving in Chennai last year from

the US was told by a customs inspector that for Rs. 3,500 he would let their 20 bags through unchecked. Without it, he threatened to take three hours to examine (and collect duty on) every single item they carried. In a hurry, they paid, sensing the punishment that awaited them if they declined. Horror stories abound: people forced to wait in empty offices for hours and then sent home unserved at day's end. Others having business papers, even mail, "lost" until money makes them reappear.

Both the demander and the giver of graft are guilty, and equally. We ratify the iniquity whenever we accept a briber's bid. It is not enough to complain and then ante-up the requisite fee. Everytime we participate, even reluctantly, in the smallest bribe, we give new hope to unscrupulous fellows, nurture their petty plunders and invite them to keep up the villainy. We also place ourselves in the same category as corrupt officials--just because the transaction is smaller does not make it less venal. There is a solution. Surrender the excuses: a.) Everyone does it, why not me? b.) It's just part of the culture and c.) My actions aren't going to change things. Stand strong for dharma and stop paying. Endure the delays and nuisances, then complain to the briber's boss. Send a new message. If we all did so, bribers would soon lose their clout and their craft would disappear.