



Do we really want to remove or reduce corruption?

Ensuring certainty of punishment rather than severity is the need of the hour, says **Arun Kumar Jagatramka**



The middle class - a broad canvas, that encompasses a huge section of our society, and is still, largely neglected by the development authorities. Neglected because they do not form a definite vote bank; a criterion which, unfortunately in our democracy determines the extent of political attention that one may command.

But in these recent years, the middle class has exhibited 'strength' and 'unity', and commanded attention, not only from the national government, but also from the world. Be it the demonstrations at Jantar Mantar or protests at India Gate against a barbaric act, the middle class's anger and intolerance to injustice has been evident. It would be naive to consider this anger as a one off event. Rather it is an outburst of a deeper anger, a manifestation against the depraved neglect and extortion of the vast middle class. This seething resentment is bound to explode again, at any instance of injustice which shakes the basic credo of being human and strikes a chord among the millions.

Extortion has been the bedrock of the present governance system in our country. It is universal, and all pervasive. Independent India has made huge progress. We have had an excellent economic growth. We have made remarkable advancement in science & technology, have been able to improve the living conditions of our people. But amidst all these achievements, we have also continued with the colonial legacy of extortion. As extortion thrived, corruption the direct by-product has also multiplied.

We take a myopic view of the system, introduce laws which encourage corruption and in the process hand out more tools for extortion. As an immediate example, recently a circular was issued by CBEC putting a deadline of 30 days for the taxpayers to obtain a stay against a disputed tax demand and allows the department officers to go for coercive recovery measures after 30 days irrespective of the merits of the case. The irony of the circular which abates extortion is that, even if the stay application is not heard for reasons attributable to the authorities themselves, the tax payer is at their mercy. Such draconian rules which are extortionary, certainly encourage corruption. Today all services except the 17 exempt heads under negative lists are covered under service tax net. This puts a vast array of people who would be subjected to extortion and thus increasing corruption in the country many fold. It is beyond the imagination of any right thinking individual that when there is a smouldering anger against extortion, when there is a raging debate on how to minimise corruption, how such regressive circulars & guidelines could be issued.

We need to follow the old maxim of "think before you act" and as such it also applies to the authorities in power before they promulgate any law. We have enough of laws. What we require is their correct implementation. Enacting harsh laws would not increase revenue collection. They only give a license to increase the payout. Instead we need to ensure 'certainty of punishment' to the criminal.

We talk of demographic dividend. But need to be careful of a Malthusian nightmare. It is time that we sit back and take serious note of things...