

# SOMETHING WRONG WITH OUR WAY OF LIFE

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**M**any have asked me “How can we eradicate corruption?” I often reply that “it is impossible thing to do- until we understand what motivates people and gets them to instinctively behave with integrity.

Different people have different ideals and beliefs. We cannot force everyone to want the same thing but that should not stop us from working to achieve the greater good.

We need to see and understand the big picture — that the rich do not want the same thing as the poor. Those who depend on their jobs for their livelihoods do not want the same thing as those who live off investments and dividends. Those who depend on public transport, education and protection, do not seek the same thing as those who can afford private transport, education and protection. If we were to assume that everyone wants the same thing, then we are mistaken and misled.

Societies are complex and there are conflicting interests. To assert otherwise, that is to deny the distinctions of class, wealth or influence, is akin to promoting one set of interests above another.

Markets have a natural disposition to favour needs and wants that can be reduced to commercial criteria or economic measurements. But, what of those goods/benefits that human beings value that do not lend themselves to quantification? What of well-being, fairness or equity? Such considerations mean more to most people, than aggregate or even individual profit or growth.

When we talk of our public education for example, it often boils down to how our schools or universities are performing in an imaginary global competition. Little, if nothing at all is discussed whether the kinds of schools or universities we ought to have, fits into the picture of the kind of society we wishes to live in. The question of whether our schools and universities produce decent individuals who are responsible and morally

aware, sits for most parents and their children, on a rung far, far below whether they will end up with good jobs that will make them endless amounts of money.

This is something I fear that is profoundly wrong with the way we live today. For decades, we have made a virtue out of the pursuit of material self-interest. We know what things cost but have no idea what they are worth. We no longer ask of judicial rulings or legislative acts, whether they are good, fair, just or right. Or, whether they will help bring about a better society or a better world.

Those used to be important political questions, even if they invited no easy answers. We must learn once again to ask ourselves these hard questions if we are serious in wanting a better future for our children and their children.

The question of integrity or the lack of it cannot be furnished by viewing it purely from the point of view of laws or institutions. Integrity means to act with virtue. Yet, the cultivation of virtue cannot be channelled merely through the imposition of rules and regulations. Moral awareness cannot be a by-product of legislation; wise and effective legislation are the by-products of a good and decent society — only then can we begin to tackle corruption and other forms of immorality more effectively.

If we are serious about tackling the problems of moral erosion in society (and I take corruption and the lack of integrity to be critical symptoms of this), then we must be able to see the problem in its proper relief. We cannot afford to be complacent. True, sensible laws and public institutions as well as having the right people to man and enforce them, are an integral part of the process. But, that is only a part of it. Focusing our struggles on this aspect of the conundrum merely deals with the symptoms of the problems — not the cause.

To tackle the cause, we must first understand the problem. To understand the problem, we must be able to frame the right

questions. In this, I think, we have sold ourselves short. For example, in our haste to show that we have begun to tackle the question of corruption effectively, we continually look towards various international indices, such as the Corruption Perception Index of Transparency International, which rank the levels of corruption in a given country and the efficacy of efforts to overcome the problem.

Thus, just as how we imagine the qualities of our universities as best illustrated through ranking exercises, we frequently do the same for the way we think about corruption. If we have improved five places from last year's standing, we must have done something right. This is both dangerous and misleading. Indices show generalised indicators; they cannot be the guiding principle in which we think about the problems of our society. No doubt, indices have a general utility but they only reveal a small piece of the puzzle.

In the end, we must have a vision of the kind of society we want, and ultimately, the efforts we invest through our education system must be guided by this vision. It does us much greater harm to abdicate the responsibilities we have for each other as members of this society to merely a universal template and hope that this will solve our problems.

One key underlying principle that is important in shaping the institutional arrangements to combat the moral erosion of society is a holistic education system, where for example, an accounting teacher would constantly remind his students that the lessons taught are not to be exploited for creative accounting to avoid paying taxes, but for the knowledge gained to be used responsibly and to always do what is right.

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