

Corporate Transparency

There is considerable debate on how corruption must be reduced in the government. It spawned a movement,- which shook the nation;- and subsequently a political party. Most organizations in Western countries do not have specific Vigilance departments, whereas most of our government departments cannot do without these. Since the Vigilance departments are ineffective we have an Anti-corruption bureau. To ensure independent investigation we have a CBI. Since these are not adequate we have the CVC, and now the talk of a Lokpal as the panacea for corruption.

The objective of this article is to see whether a method can be evolved to curb the corruption which takes place by collusion between big business and government functionaries. This hurts the nation seriously, since it is now estimated to be in millions of dollars. As many people point out there are basically two types of corruption in government offices:

- Extortionist- where bribes are demanded for a legitimate service or as a price to avoid harassment.
- Collusive- where the giver is eager to give bribes so that he can indulge in an illegal act, or enrich himself at the cost of the public. This is usually of very large value and hurts public finances significantly.

This piece is an attempt to suggest that non-government action can lead to reduction of the second kind of corruption, which results in huge scams and great cost to public exchequer. Let me make an attempt to outline how this could be achieved. I am basing my suggestions on the following assumption:

A small percentage of the corporate would collapse if corruption were to be curtailed, since their profits depend on them. A comparable number of corporates lose a lot of business opportunities to the former because of unwillingness to adopt

unethical practices. Most of the corruption of the collusive kind is indulged in by the former. For corporate of the second kind, there is a business need to curtail the collusive corruption. Apart from this there may be a consideration of ethics and a genuine desire to curb corruption. If a few such companies decide to take active steps to curtail corruption, and are quite clear that they will not adopt this route of getting unfair or unjust advantage from the government, they can make a difference to the overall national scenario. Taking a proactive role to achieve this goal is in their business interest and could translate to higher profits.

Unfair advantages by collusive corruption are obtained by paying lower taxes or getting unfair reliefs in paying taxes. Another area is getting lands or other infrastructure in a manner which gives them an effective subsidy. One more avenue is to bid competitively for providing services or for public private partnerships, and subsequently changing the conditions to affect public interest adversely. The idea is that those who wish to promote honesty and look at it as their social responsibility publicly pledge to display all transactions with governments on their websites.

Companies could also declare a policy for disclosure in which they could declare that certain information, which may harm their commercial interests would not be displayed. This would be very little, which might harm the legitimate commercial interests of the companies. They could declare the kind of information in government transactions which they would not display and explain their reasons. Many business leaders regret the lack of transparency and the corruption in government. They can take the lead and demonstrate their willingness to be transparent and also to transform the nation. It would be very good if a few businesses got together and announced their commitment to be transparent in their transactions with government. If they have taken a

conscious decision to refuse the route of corruption to get undue advantage they would lose nothing and certainly gain respect from citizens and peers. Businesses may well argue that citizens should get the information from the government departments. These departments usually do not give information which would reveal favours despite this being a violation of their obligation in Right to Information Act.

There could be two benefits for companies who publicly announce and practice transparency in all transactions with government:

- They would be recognized by public for their commitment to transparency and corporate social responsibility.
- Over a period of time if more companies follow suit, it would create a pressure on others to accept this level of transparency.

As the law stands most of this information should be accessible to citizens from government departments using RTI, except that which is exempt. However when large corruption is involved, the information is usually denied and a citizen finds it difficult to battle this unjust denial.

Private action could have the potential of curbing corruption. I am hoping a few will take the lead. Corporates can make an effective contribution to bringing transparency and accountability and reducing corruption in the nation. Will some corporate take the lead? This could also be achieved if regulatory agencies, - like SEBI in India, - make it mandatory for all companies.

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