

## Corruption: missing the woods for the trees

IN OUR class-ridden society who cares for an ex-army jeep driver? And yet Kishan Baburao Hazare, now so fondly called Anna Hazare, has emerged as one of India's leading environmental warriors. His stewardship of Ralegan Siddhi village in Maharashtra's Ahmednagar district has turned it into an environmental model. Every slope is afforested and every *nala* bunded. The result is a village more capable of dealing with recurrent droughts than its neighbours. A lot of the money for the 'environmental works' has come from government schemes except that Ralegan Siddhi has set its own priorities and made honest use of government money.

Hazare is today on the warpath, threatening to return the medals he has received from officialdom, to stem corruption amongst officials. The district's drinking water schemes on which lakhs of rupees have been spent are non-functional. The social forestry department has bought expensive equipment for which there is no use. Hazare's war is a matter of embarrassment for Sharad Pawar, the state's chief minister.<sup>1</sup>

Corruption has always been of interest to the media and, not surprisingly, there have been news reports about Hazare's effort. But where will they get us? To a few enquiries? To a few transfers and suspensions? While the system goes on as it is? Even though everyone talks about corruption, media and politicians get most excited about corruption in high places and not about the widespread base of corruption which is eating away at the entrails of the country and is, today, a source of constant harassment and fear for every honest citizen of India — from a tribal woman who wants to collect grass from the neighbouring forest to a city dweller who wants to get a building plan authorised.

In his *Asian Drama*, Gunnar Myrdal wrote over 20 years ago that although corruption is a public issue in all South Asian countries, it is

1. Chief minister three times between 1978 and 1995.

almost taboo as a research topic. How many times has the scholarly *Economic and Political Weekly* published research on corruption?

One of the dramatic cases of corruption is the afforestation programme in the country. Between 1980 and 1988, the country is said to have planted roughly 12 million hectares (equal to Kerala and Assam), according to official statistics — an average of about 40,000 new trees per village. It is rare to find a village with even 500 new trees. To achieve this vast forested area (on paper), the country has spent over Rs 3,000 crore.

Low survival of trees planted is not the entire story. Firstly, there is the 'corruption factor'. The number of seedlings that are actually produced are possibly nowhere near the figures found in official records. At a recent meeting, a senior official claimed he had found 1,000 per cent overreporting in certain districts. A forest official present simply retorted, "What do you do expect if the National Wastelands Development Board sets such ambitious and impractical targets?" Secondly, there is the 'pressure factor'. Seedlings taken by farmers, often pressured by officials to meet targets, are not planted. Finally, many seedlings planted do not survive. All combined, the result is India is forest-rich in government records.

The saga of corruption does not end here. Whenever it suits the bureaucracy or the political system, it takes advantage of the widespread feeling about corruption to denigrate people, knowing that whatever the facts, mud will stick. When we had publicly raised the issue about a *tehsildar* in Alwar district having levied the first fine of the world for planting trees — local villagers had built a wall on government land without permission to protect the planted trees — district authorities responded by labelling the local voluntary agency corrupt. But, of course, they did not take action. So the phenomenon works both ways — fill your pocket when it suits you and denigrate good people when they are a nuisance.

Three factors contribute to corruption: shortage of necessities, excess of power, and secrecy. Shortages of seats in schools or of fodder are not going to disappear and this will continue to cause corruption. Only development can solve it. But the factors of power and secrecy can be moderated immediately. Since it will be impossible to get rid of 'power', powerful people will always be tempted by the chance to escape detection. Corruption in high places continues to exist in the US, UK or Sweden.

But the extraordinary power that exists at every level of the bureaucracy and the political system can be systematically reduced through systems of participatory democracy, which may also have some impact on corruption in high places.

Forest officials are not inherently corrupt. The problem lies in our system of governance — embodied in a closed bureaucratic system with enormous powers to conceal. Why can't the forest bureaucracy in Ahmednagar, for example, report to a public institution headed by Annasaheb Hazare, in Chamoli to Chandi Prasad Bhatt<sup>2</sup> and in Palamau to P R Mishra?<sup>3</sup> These are some of the outstanding sons of India but they do not participate in its governance. True, there may not be many Bhatts or Hazares but there are hundreds of dedicated people who are prepared to see the country being greened and growing. Ralegan Siddhi is a model village because of the decentralised governance Hazare has provided it.

Furthermore, if secrecy is reduced, people will become aware and fight against corruption. Rampant corruption in *panchayats* has been a convenient excuse not to decentralise power and finances. But our experience with village-level natural resource management shows that institutions that encourage participation of communities and not just of a few elected representatives invariably force open discussions. For example, encroachments regularly take place on village common lands. But these encroachments get legalised only because of the nexus between local officials and village notables. In Seed,<sup>4</sup> near Udaipur, a village which is legally empowered to keep its own land records and take its decisions by majority vote (instead of a few *panchayat* members), there is no encroachment.

Anna Hazare's message shouldn't get lost in a few enquiries. If the ex-prime minister, V P Singh, for instance, who made corruption an election issue, had been serious, he would have set up a commission to enquire into the very system of governance in this country. But that is precisely what politicians — red, blue or saffron — don't want. ■

2. One of the principal leaders of the Chipko movement. See footnote 1, pp. 27.

3. See pp. 66-67.

4. See footnote. 2, p. 27.