

THE 'CRISIS OF CORRUPTION' AND 'THE IDEA OF INDIA' : A WORM'S EYE VIEW.

Jonathan P. Parry

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Introduction

“What is the history of India since 1947 the history of ?” asks Sunil Khilnani (1997:1) at the start of his deservedly much-noticed book on *The idea of India*. His answer: that it is centrally the history of the state and of the idea of democracy. While in pre-British India the political domain was located at a distance from the moral core of society, with important consequences for the stability of the state (remember Dumont [1970]), the great achievement of Nehru’s rule lay “in its establishment of the state at the core of India’s society” (ibid. p. 19f, 41). As for democracy, it has survived - notwithstanding Indira Gandhi’s brief Emergency interlude - against all the odds, allowing (most) Indians a considerable measure of liberty even if it has not delivered to many the prosperity it promised. And that’s one danger that threatens it, for at root the economic failures are political. Even more menacing perhaps is “the menace of a tyranny of the religious majority” (ibid. p. 10).

To these dangers many others might add the current “crisis of corruption”, a phrase I borrow from Guhan (1997:15) but which captures the spirit of a spate of other recent scholarly works (e.g. Gill 1998; Singh 1999; Visvanathan and Sethi 1998), of a good deal of solemn editorializing, and of widespread popular perceptions at all levels of the social order. A content analysis of *chay*-shop conversation would probably reveal that corruption beats even the state of the crops; and in *chay*-shop and Gymkhana Club alike it is widely held to have reached such

epidemic proportions that it threatens to discredit democracy and destabilize the state by completely subverting its legitimacy. According to some commentators (e.g. Gill 1998: 56-7; Visvanathan 1998: 44), it was ironically Nehru himself who started the post-Independence rot by his embarrassed indulgence of such peccadilloes as the Krishna Menon jeep scandal, or of the apparent inability of his strong-arm Punjab Chief Minister (Pratap Singh Kairon) to prevent his progeny from picking the public purse. And according to most, the spiral since then has been ever upwards.

It is true that there is a certain narrowly economic strand of social science reasoning - determined to prove that Mandeville was right and that private vice does indeed result in public benefit - which would see in corruption no serious cause for concern. Indeed it might even seem reasonable to propose that public policy should promote it. It may supposedly cut through red-tape and provide private incentives to dynamize a sluggish bureaucracy; buy influence for get-ahead entrepreneurs from socially-marginalized groups; allocate contracts to the most efficient producers who can afford the largest kick-backs; introduce competition in monopolistic industries; encourage investment by making the bureaucracy more predictable and by freeing up funds which would otherwise disappear in taxation; provide a 'hedge' against the unwise economic policies of the state by subverting them, and encourage a healthy ethos of self-seeking (Leff 1993; cf. Nye 1993). That in the real world each of these propositions might rather more plausibly be stood on its head - that corruption encourages bureaucratic torpidity and the proliferation of red-tape (Myrdal 1968: 951f); disadvantages the most efficient producers and the marginalized, widens inequalities and promotes uncertainty (Waterbury 1993, Goodman 1993; Gill 1998; Wade 1982) - is I think obvious enough. If I also appear in what follows to suggest that the cloud has a silver lining, it should at least be clear that I do not begin from these particular Panglossian assumptions.

Nor, more importantly, do my informants for whom corruption is a real pathology and in many of whom it provokes a growing sense of outrage. The Hindi words *brashtachar* and *ghus* cover roughly the same ground as our English categories 'corruption' and 'bribe'. Neither is

morally neutral, and we can immediately dismiss the cultural relativist fantasy that it is merely ethnocentric to employ terms like 'bribery' and 'corruption' to talk about payments which contemporary Indians regard as legitimate perquisites of office. On the whole, they do not - especially when the office's is somebody else's and it is they who are providing the perks. And what most fundamentally underlies their condemnation, I believe, is that they have to some extent internalised the universalistic and impersonal values associated with modern bureaucracy.

The informants in question are mainly working- and lower-middle class people employed in the large new industrial town which has grown up around the Bhilai Steel Plant in the Chhattisgarh region of Madhya Pradesh. Most of my data relate to what Paul and Shah (1997) call 'retail' corruption - to the low-level routine corruption of everyday experience. So routine in fact that it is a source of some surprise that - with very few valiant exceptions (like Wade 1982 and Gupta 1995) - so little published ethnography has attempted to document it. It is at any rate the kind of data which more or less falls into the fieldworker's lap, and which in the present instance has come my way almost incidentally during the course of anthropological research devoted to other issues. But there are, of course, limits to participant observation. During the course of around 16 months fieldwork in Bhilai¹, nobody has ever directly asked me for a bribe, and nobody has ever been foolish enough to imagine that I was important enough to be offered one. Though I have occasionally been present when such an inducement was offered or solicited, most of my information on the subject relates to what people *say* about bribery and corruption, to the stories they tell about it, and to their attitudes to and moral evaluation of it.

The first thing they say is that corruption is a galloping cancer that has spread so widely that its cure is now all but hopeless. And it is probably true that it is today more prevalent than thirty years back - though we should do well to remember that even in the pre-Independence period it is held to have been 'universal' amongst junior revenue and police officials (Gill 1998:25). It is also true that there is little to suggest its decline with the loosening hold of the 'license-permit *raj*' brought about by liberalization, and reason enough to suppose that the consumer boom associated with liberalisation may have encouraged its increase². But granted all that, it is the

smack of hyperbole that strikes me. I was sitting one day with a group of friends, white-collar workers in the steel plant, when the conversation turned to a local newspaper report which relayed the Transparency International finding based on a poll of business interests and financial journalists. Of the 54 countries included, India had emerged in the 1996 league table as the ninth most corrupt. 'Only ninth!' The reaction was immediate and incredulous. 'Not even best in that?' 'Beaten by Palistan, I suppose?' 'Could it really get worse?' But while from the way people talk you would never think it, it is still in fact possible to get your land registered, your house connected to the electricity supply or even a job in a public sector enterprise, without paying a bribe to do so. In short, general perceptions about the pervasiveness of corruption do not quite square with the actual experience of it³. Popular discourse seems prone to inflate it, and we should perhaps ask "Why?"

I have been visiting India at reasonably regular intervals for thirty odd years; and for thirty odd years I have been told that corruption has boomed in the interim. Commissions of enquiry, official reports and academic treatises would seem to concur. Read Myrdal (1968: 937f) or Morris-Jones (1964: 61f) for a sense of sympathetic concern from the 1960s. The *kaliyuga* has been steadily gathering pace; the politico-economic domain of *artha* is increasingly adrift from its moral moorings in *dharma*. Perhaps it is. But if the yardstick is 'retail' corruption, it is in the nature of things difficult to assess the *degree* of deterioration. The counsel of caution would perhaps be to acknowledge our ignorance and recognize that the most solid fact we possess is the *belief* that since Independence the graph of corruption has curved ever more steeply upwards. In part at least we are dealing with an idea; and in the conclusion to this paper I will hazard some suggestions as to where it has come from. But first some ethnography.

Notes on fieldnotes

A public sector undertaking, the Bhilai Steel Plant (BSP for short) was built during the late 1950s and early '60s with Soviet collaboration and technology in what was then regarded as a remote and backward region of rural Chhattisgarh. Now one of the largest steel plants in Asia, BSP currently runs at its four million ton capacity, and in the mid-1990s directly employed just

under 55,000 workers, a significant proportion of whom originate from other parts of India and live in the spacious new company township. Around this continent consisting of the 17 square kilometre plant and its even larger adjacent township are substantial offshore islands of private sector industrial development - around 200 factories on the new industrial estate alone - set in a sea of more or less squalid slums, of old Chhattisgarh villages now swallowed up by urban sprawl and of colonies of posh private houses, for the most part constructed for their retirement by long-serving BSP employees - not just by managers but many by workers as well.

As this already suggests, the BSP workforce is a real 'aristocracy of labour'. The job is for life; and by Indian standards the wages are high, the bonuses better and the fringe benefits truly munificent; while for some workers (though for rather more clerks and managers) the scope for making a substantial income 'on top' is supposedly ample: from purloining BSP equipment, raw materials and products on a scale that goes far beyond mere pilfering; from 'commissions' on contracts and 'understandings' with contractors to bill for machinery or labour they have not supplied; from illicitly subletting BSP housing and so forth. The list of scams could go on and on. Not only that, but the vast majority of workers have time on their hands. Though it is certainly true that in 'hard' shops - like the Coke Ovens, Blast Furnaces or Sintering Plants - some tasks are remarkably taxing, the proportion of the day which is spent of them is not - seldom more than three or four hours in a shift, after which it is generally possible to sneak off home⁴. It is therefore hardly surprising that the more get-ahead workers often devote more of their energies to their moonlighting activities than they do to their jobs in the plant - to property-dealing or money-lending, to running a shop, a truck, taxi-business or typing institute. Nor is it surprising that BSP workers are the envy of those with a more precarious perch in less privileged sectors of the labour market (which is to say of more or less every other 'working class' family); and that even for the lowliest post of Plant Attendant, the queue of eager aspirants would stretch all the way from Raipur to Durg. But with the current recession, the increasing mechanization of the plant, and as the effects of Government 'liberalization' policies begin to bite, the number of available jobs has begun to dwindle⁴ while the number of qualified candidates has steadily risen. So today the competition for jobs is cut-throat, and it is the 'corruption' which reputedly

surrounds recruitment to the plant labour force which impinges most pressingly on the consciousness of my informants.

Even in its early days, however, a good deal of chicanery had surrounded BSP recruitment, though the dominant form which this takes has certainly changed. In order to make way for the plant, its associated mines and quarries, and for the new BSP township, land was compulsorily purchased by Government from 96 villages. The dispossessed peasants were compensated at current market values, and one member from each household was subsequently given the right to claim a BSP job. Land requisition certificates rapidly became a marketable commodity and were often illicitly re-cycled for further use. Some households shrewdly partitioned their holdings in areas which were still to be taken over so that each of the sons could claim employment; others bought miniscule plots in such areas to provide for an additional family member, and there was a remarkable spate of 'adoptions' as widows and elderly childless couples acquired notional 'sons' in search of employment. My friend Somvaru⁶, for example, persuaded Pyari Bai - the widow next door - to adopt his eldest lad Dukhit. The down-payment was Rs 700 and the understanding was that he would help her out from his wages. But with a regular income Dukhit took to the bottle and Pyari Bai's hand-outs very soon ceased. By 1989, when BSP eventually called a halt to honouring these certificates, the scheme had become a scandal.

In conformity with the affirmative action policy of 'protective discrimination' provided for by India's constitution, 23% of BSP posts in non-executive grades are reserved for candidates from the so-called Scheduled Tribes (the supposed aboriginal peoples of the area), and 14% for candidates from the Scheduled Castes (those traditionally regarded as 'untouchable')⁷.. To get in on the reserved quota, some *high* caste aspirants for BSP jobs acquire Scheduled Tribe, or even Scheduled Caste, certificates. How many I don't of course know, though in the case of one young Bengali friend the ruse was recently rumbled when Vigilance investigated his whole batch of 50 interviewees. 7 were reputedly found to have provided false certificates of one kind or the other.

To get almost any job at all, let alone a permanent one in the plant, 'source' or 'approach' (the English words are part of everyday vocabulary) is seen as essential. Everybody searches for somebody with some influence in the employment exchange to advance their papers in the queue of applicants, and *bhai-bhatijavad* - 'brother-nephewism' - is assumed to be rampant in the selection process. Though close relatives who refuse to help - perhaps because they know that they do not have the *pahunch*, or 'reach', required - are criticised for their unnatural lack of family feeling, it is also recognised that today the limits of real obligation are more narrowly drawn than they were a generation ago: typically, one's own children of course, one's real siblings and their children, and one's first cousins if they also live in Bhilai. These days no appeal to anything so vague as a common caste identity is likely to cut much ice. One man I know - a Bihari Brahman - is reputed to have taken money from his real brother's son for fixing a job, and though he has said to have done so on the pretext that every rupee of it would be needed to pay off his superior officers, the story occasioned some scandal and was seen as a deplorable sign of the times.

As this suggests, the times are supposedly such that 'source' has been progressively replaced by 'note' (the bank variety of course) as the most important means of securing a job in public (and increasingly also in private) sector employment. But as it also suggests, the etiquette of the transaction often seems to require that both parties to it should maintain the polite fiction that the 'eater' of notes is merely a 'source' who simply does one a favour by passing them on up 'through the proper channel'. A largely impersonal commercial transaction is thus transformed into a personal act of friendship, permitting everybody to pretend that the recipient is a man of integrity and the deal only slightly beyond what is proper. But privately, of course, most donors have few illusions; even if they can never be sure how much of their money moves on, and how much gets stuck as 'commission'. And when the job, or the contract or whatever, does not come through, they are not unnaturally inclined to conclude that that must mean all of it - that every rupee was 'eaten' before its reached its proper destination. It is plainly an interpretation which 'proves' what everyone anyway 'knows': that corruption goes to the very top, and that if a bribe does not bear fruit that can only be because of some 'dishonesty' in the chain of

intermediaries. It is easy to see how the appearance of an all-pervasive corruption is sustained, even when the hands of those who actually take the decisions are clean.

But however that may be, more or less every second household with a son of the appropriate age in the industrial neighbourhoods in which I worked has a story about how they paid this or that middle man a substantial sum to fix up their boy in BSP. And of course the almost inevitable sequel is that there was no job and the money was never returned, or at best was only eventually repaid in dribs and drabs after threats of violence. The sums involved are variable. As we shall see, there are major obstacles to be cleared at various stages in the recruitment process, and since each offers a potential opportunity for fresh demands, it is difficult to predict the total likely outlay. During my first phase of fieldwork in 1993-4, those who had recently given, and in almost all cases lost their money, claim to have parted with anything between Rs 5000 and Rs 15,000 to get a foot in the door by receiving an interview 'call' from the plant. Statistically, what such a 'call' provides is a 1: 20 chance of eventual selection. But rates have rocketed in the last few years, and now I am regularly told of demands in the range of Rs 35,000 - 50,000 for the post of Plant Attendant. That would represent something like year's take-home pay for a young BSP worker at the bottom of the ladder; but the equivalent of three or four years' gross income for a middle-aged contract worker in a small private sector factory.

Case history 1 :

Take Somvaru again, whose eldest boy was by now employed in the plant as the 'adopted son' of a 'displaced person'. The date must be sometime in the late 1980s; and Somvaru's present problem was a job for the next one, and for an unemployed and indigent son-in-law. The family are ('untouchable') Satnamis and they live in Girvi, an ex-village-cum-labour colony where one of their close neighbours and distant kinsman is Vilayati. Though partially deaf and rather lame, Vilayati had recently travelled to Moscow and Paris as a member of a dance troupe headed by his *mitan* ('ritual friend'), Bhagat Ram - another Satnami and a celebrated artiste employed by the BSP Public Relations Department. As somebody who has roamed *desh-videsh* (India and abroad), the latter

is a man with contacts, a man who can fix up a job for his friends. The word was out - in Girvi via Vilayati - that he currently had a line on posts in Maitri Bagh (the BSP park with boating-lake and zoo) and in the Dalli-Rajhera mines. With regard to the latter, the story was that Bhagat Ram could place his candidates with his *khas admi* (his 'special man'), the contractor Mishra; Mishra could get them regularized as permanent BSP workers, and they could then get themselves transferred back to Bhilai. How many jobs were supposedly on offer I never learned. But what I was repeatedly told is that Bhagat Ram had his 'Vilayatis' in a number of other villages (including Singhpura, a Satnami settlement with a formidable reputation for lawlessness); and I know of at least seven candidates from Girvi (all bar one Satnamis) on whose behalf he is said to have accepted a payment. For his son, Somvaru had parted with Rs 3,500; for his son-in-law with Rs 4,500, on account of the fact that he was over the age limit for a BSP job. It must have seemed like a bargain since most of the others had been charged Rs 5,000. But it was money down the drain. Mishra did not get the contract (or so they said), and none of the Girvi people got their money back - though the lads from Singhpura apparently did, by dint of taking an intimidatingly large posse on motor-bikes to call at Bhagat Ram's house. But Somvaru is a peaceable - as he himself puts it, a "cold-brained" (*thanda dimag*) - man, and just let it go. The son in question eventually got a secure (though less remunerative) job in the State Government's Health Department (for which he did not have to pay), and the daughter's husband survived - until his untimely death in 1994 - on his tiny parcel of land and occasional subventions from his father-in-law.

That was also the year in which Somvaru had the opportunity to do something about his youngest boy, Raj Kumar, whose only visible occupation was working on a winning formula to make his fortune at *satta* (a numbers racket), who was keeping bad company and generally up to no good. This arose through another son-in-law who is a senior teacher in a BSP school (as is his wife Janaki), and who had an acquaintance who claimed to be able to arrange an interview 'call' through one of the more distant employment exchanges for a small number of posts in the BSP fire brigade. The cost was

Rs 8,000, and to raise this amount Somvaru gave Raj Kumar some of his deceased wife's jewellery to sell. But again there was a hitch, though this time most (though not all) of the money was returned through the good offices of Janaki and her husband.

On the next occasion, which was in 1998, Raj Kumar had to go it alone. Somvaru had misgivings from the start, and was anyway exasperated with his profligate son. In the meantime the latter had set himself up in a low-key laid-back loss-making animal fodder business in partnership with his friend Jagmohan. Jagmohan had heard through his FZHeBS, a small-time political wheeler-dealer in the district headquarters at Durg, of a certain government clerk who again claimed to be able to arrange a BSP 'call' from the Bastar employment exchange. A meeting was arranged, the clerk produced a list of ten persons whom he said he was also helping, and Raj Kumar, Jagmohan and the latter's FBS each handed over Rs 10, 000. Their suspicions were aroused when a couple of days later their 'benefactor' arrived on a brand-new motor-scooter to say that it was unfortunately going to cost rather more than he had anticipated and that he would need another Rs 2,000 from each of them. They paid what he asked but took their worries to Janaki and her husband (having previously gone ahead with the deal against their advice). Linked into the educated Satnami elite, they were somehow able to establish (or so they reported) that the Bastar exchange had not been notified of any BSP vacancies. The clerk was lured back to Girvi, and after a thorough interrogation by the redoubtable Janaki, Jagmohan promised to break his arms and legs unless their money was returned that evening. They then marched him off to the nearest telephone, after which he was imprisoned in the fodder shop. A delegation arrived from Durg to beg for their forgiveness, for another two days to raise the repayment and for the release of their relative. This was magnanimously granted, though the scooter was to stay in the shop as surety. The money was returned along with an abject message expressing the fervent hope that that would be the end of the matter.

As this example already suggests, the pivotal figure of the middle-man is generally a comparative stranger; at least he is seldom somebody with whom the family has close personal ties. He is a *dalal*, or 'commission agent', and - the etiquette of the transaction notwithstanding - the fact that he is in business is clear to all. For obvious practical reasons, the initial contact between them is however almost invariably mediated through somebody who spans the personal networks of both. Corruption relies on a certain degree of confidentiality. In the present instance 'secrecy' is perhaps too strong a word, but it is at least clear that the *dalal* is unwise to advertise his services too brazenly and needs friends to spread the news to friends. At least on the part of those who are paying, it also relies on a certain modicum of trust; and simple prudence suggests that they should deal with the *dalal* through a known intermediary on whom they have some leverage, and who in turn appears to have some on the broker. Many families are given to understand by the most casual of acquaintances that they might be in a position to help in the matter of their young man's employment. But most hesitate to proceed on such an offer unless they can find a friend or relative in common to vouch for him - though there is always of course the possibility that that person is in on the sting (as Vilayati apparently was). Clearly, the higher you are in the social hierarchy the more trusting you can allow yourself to be. Your network is more likely to include persons of substance with real lien on the broker.

But the element of trust should not be over-estimated. For a start, it is required in roughly inverse proportion to one's readiness for violence. If social sanctions through one's personal network cannot guarantee the bargain, physical sanctions are a serviceable substitute. Though one may not get the job, one may at least - as the above case history shows - be able to recoup one's losses. In my experience, moreover, few people do in fact really trust the *dalals* they deal with. When circumstances permit, the favour-seeker tries to withhold a significant proportion of the payment until the favour has been actually rendered. But the most important reason why such transactions can proceed on rather low levels of trust is quite simply because people can all too readily imagine the alternatives - unemployment or poorly-paid, back-breaking, low status and often exploitative employment in the informal sector of the economy. It is not trust, but *desperation* - combined with the unshakeable conviction that that is the only

way in which you land a decent job - which pushes most people into the broker's embrace. 'The only way?' I once asked a group of apprentices with whom I was discussing their prospects of a BSP berth. 'May be one in a hundred gets through without', they conceded. 'But the number is so small that it does not count'. Though well aware of the risks, they would pay because otherwise they would spend their lives reproaching themselves (or more likely their fathers) for passing up on their one opportunity for a respectable and materially rewarding existence. The corrupt may certainly have some incentive to be reticent about their own corruption; but the louder the cry that nothing can be accomplished without it the fuller their pockets. Corruption is often said to thrive on secrecy. It does pretty well on publicity too.

What does the *dalal* supposedly do for his money? For every BSP post in a given grade, the local Durg employment exchange forwards the names of ten qualified candidates; while the other exchanges in the region sponsor ten other names. According to rule, these should be forwarded in the strict order in which the applicants lodged their cards, which in the case of the lowest rungs of BSP recruitment they are eligible to do as soon as they have matriculated - that is, until recently passed their tenth class exams, and now their twelfth. So long is the queue of applicants that by the end of 1997 BSP were still interviewing candidates who had applied for a Plant Attendant post in 1984. But before they are interviewed, the candidates take a written examination and then, if they pass, a physical. The final board consists of the Collector of the district (its most senior Government official) or his representative, and representatives from the management of BSP, the district employment office, the recognised trade union (the INTUC) and the Social Welfare Department (Jan Kalyan Vibhag). The *dalal* might claim to be in a position to advance his client's card in the queue, or even perhaps lodge it near the top in one of the more remote exchanges. The results of the written examination are generally held to be fairly immune to manipulation, but the medical is notoriously sticky since the doctors involved are said to have a uncanny way of finding that the apparently sharp-sighted and keen of hearing recruit is actually more or less blind or deaf. The *dalal* might persuade them otherwise. Alternatively his "reach" might extend to one of the members of the selection board, each of whom is believed to have a personal quota of posts to fill. And if it at any stage the outcome is unfavourable, then

he must have 'eaten' the money himself or could not have had the 'approach' he claimed. Or perhaps on this occasion, there were just too many bribes chasing too few jobs and that next time round one will have better luck. The secondary elaborations are legion and effectively preserve the premise that corruption is the only route to success.

And *sometimes* it *appears* to work. Those who have given *are* appointed, and the assumption is that the two things are connected. But since so many of the applicants have probably taken steps to promote their interests, and since BSP has to appoint *somebody*, that assumption seems far from safe. Moreover, one of the *dalal's* standard strategies is to gain advance access to the confidential lists of those who are about to be called for interview or who have already been selected but not yet informed of their appointment. Ten or twelve of the prospective interviewees will be targeted and told that the *dalal* can help. By the law of probability one or two of them are almost certain to be selected without his lifting a finger, and from these he makes his money. The rest are reimbursed with the excuse that on this occasion there was a particular problem, and his reputation as an honest broker is enhanced. And of course those who have been selected already, get the job they would have got anyway, while the *dalal* gets his fee and a boost to his fame as a fixer.

And *suppose* it is true (I speak hypothetically having no actual evidence on the matter) that this or that member of the board has a quota of posts which are more or less in his gift. In Mayer's terms, he is therefore a patron and must deal in his 'own' resources. The broker by contrast deals only in (more elastic) promises - that he will be able to persuade the patron to confer some tangible benefit on his clients. A patron characteristically needs brokers to expand his network, as a buffer between himself and a long line of supplicants, and as a protection against the consequences of transactions that turn sour, which in this case might result in an official complaint. Brokers, however, are prone to be far more liberal with their commitments than the patron who must actually to meet them (Mayer 1966; cf. Hannerz 1980:191). In other words, our hypothetically corrupt board member is likely to operate through several intermediaries, each of whom is tempted to inflate the patronage which is really at his disposal. If, more

concretely, he has five posts to fill and he puts out the word through five *dalals* who collectively exaggerate the number of positions available by a modest 20 per cent, assurances are likely to have been offered to at least thirty candidates. It is easy to see how, by a kind of optical illusion, even a relatively small minority of corrupt appointments may appear to the pool of job-seekers as a rather significant majority.

And 'optical illusion' is what I suspect that it quite largely is. While the world over people who have failed to get selected are predisposed to claim that something in the procedure smelt, the striking thing here is that it is not only their mothers who believe them. But while this may include many workers themselves, very few of the scores with whom I discussed the way in which they got their *own* job mentioned money (though I often asked them directly and though rather more acknowledged a 'source') Now I am, of course, perfectly well aware that their silence might be motivated. Many perhaps would like me to think that they were selected on 'merit' (though in fact most clearly recognize that they are not self-evidently worthier than all of their unemployed peers). Many more might suspect that an incautious admission that they had purchased their job might result in Vigilance ending it. So why do I credit their denial? Not discounting the possibility that a proportion of them were prudently economical with the truth, I am on the whole willing to do so because of the way in which it was made and the context in which the matter arose - spontaneous private conversations held both inside and outside the plant in which *without prompting* the worker might volunteer, with the astonished surprise of a lottery winner recounting his good fortune, that he did not pay even a pie. Moreover, many of these same workers told me self-incriminating stories on which Vigilance would be far more likely to act; while - as we shall see - people in general are often breathtakingly candid about the inducements they offer.

It is at this stage perhaps also worth saying that - by contrast with what is widely reputed to be the case in other government departments (like the police or irrigation where the most lucrative postings are more or less auctioned [Cf. Wade 1982]) - there are rather few BSP stories about money mediating transfers. It is true that one of the most prominent union leaders in the BSP

mines is said to arrange matters for a few who want to get back to Bhilai; but - though willing to pay Rs 20,000 - Somvaru's teacher son-in-law has been trying without success for the past two years. New recruits to the plant are almost universally averse to being assigned to one of the 'hard' shops, and mobilise any contact they can to avoid it. But once posted they are more or less stuck, and bribes are of little avail. Nor, as far as I know, do they play any significant part in promotions. In the worker grades, promotion is based largely on seniority and is quasi-automatic; and while at management level there is greater discretion - and consequently scope for charges of favouritism - I have never been told that monetary payments are the way ahead.

The belief that the BSP labour force is today more than ever recruited corruptly is closely correlated with another widespread conviction - that the plant is increasingly manned by 'shirkers' (*kamchor*). What people say, and this includes many workers themselves, is that since their fathers had to pay so much to get them the job, the youngsters today regard it as their personal property and see no reason to exert themselves⁸. Though as a sociology of the BSP work regime I regard this as fanciful, it is I think true that the considerable sum supposedly required for a post in the plant has a significant practical impact on the character of the workforce. As I have documented in more detail elsewhere (Parry 1999b), the current trend in recruitment is to prefer candidates with a trade qualification from an Industrial Training Institute. Most of these are now privately-run and admission to them is contingent on a substantial 'donation'. What the ITI certificate chiefly certifies is, not so much a certain level of skill (the training is rudimentary and is anyway often irrelevant to the job in the plant), but a certain level of family financial standing. And that is a level which no working class household in the area, save one which already enjoys a BSP salary, is likely to attain. This is compounded by the widespread conviction that on top one must pay a large bribe. Many poorer households have to conclude that they simply cannot compete, and see no point in encouraging their sons to obtain the increasingly expensive qualifications required to do so. The 'aristocracy' of labour is becoming increasingly closed to infiltration, and (the belief in) corruption plays a part in protecting its boundaries.

But what of the morality of such transactions? How does a decent man like Somvaru explain his involvement in them? With regard to past scams over land requisition certificates, my Chhattisgarhi dispossessed-peasant-turned-proletarian informants are generally quite self-righteous. It is on their land, and hence as result of their sacrifice, that the plant was built in the first place. They should therefore be preferred for employment, while in fact there is discrimination against them. They can therefore hardly be blamed for taking by subterfuge what should be theirs by right. That at least seems to be the dominant attitude of those who have actually made it into the secure haven of BSP employment. But those who have not are more equivocal. Anonymous letters spilling the beans on families in which three or four brothers all managed to get a job on the strength of a single plot are still sent to the plant, and I know several people who have lost their jobs or been suspended from duty on the basis of such complaints. Of course these reports are probably prompted by envy or are part of some routine skirmish in neighbourhood politics. But it is also the case that those who are condemned to a life of hard labour as a construction worker, coolie or rickshaw-wallah are deeply disposed to resent the fat-cats of their erstwhile village whose households have two or three BSP pay cheques, and are not quite prepared to exonerate the latter from all moral responsibility for the poverty of their own lives.

Something of the same ambivalence surrounds 'brother-nephewism' and bribes. Of course it is but natural that I should lend my sister's son a helping hand when he applies for a job - especially when we Chhattisgarhis have so little clout in the circles which matter. And of course it is outrageous that these Biharis, Bengalis, Punjabis and Malayalis should have filled the plant to overflowing with their own brothers and nephews. As for bribes, I am again continually taken aback by the apparent openness with which people - and not always people I know at all well - are prepared to tell me about payments made. But while the donors generally (though *not*, I must stress, universally) appear to be at moral ease with themselves, they are loud in their condemnation of those they have bribed - and especially when the service or favour solicited has not been provided⁹. *That* is the very epitome of 'corruption'. Some informants with whom I have pressed the matter are prepared to maintain this principle, that guilt attaches to the taker

and not to the giver of bribes, with surprising consistency. 'Of course, I am not to blame if the only way I can get an electricity connection is by paying a bribe? How do you expect my children to do their homework in the dark?' 'So is the criminal justified in paying off the police?' 'Of course he will try to do so. What sensible person would not?' One seemingly interminable afternoon, Govind - a CITU10 activist - had been bombarding me with a stream of invective about the corruption of the entire government apparatus. As I was leaving he casually mentioned the trouble he had been having with his son's admission to a BSP school. The problem was that they lived outside its catchment area. It had been solved, he informed me without trace of embarrassment, by a bribe.

Case history 2

Adhikari's family originate from Andhra Pradesh, but he and his siblings were born in Bhilai. The father is a railway man and they live in a run-down two-room quarter in the large railway colony on the way to Raipur. Untouchables by caste, the family converted to Catholicism a couple of generations back and the children have been educated in an English-medium mission school. There were six of them, but one sister died and another was recently married. Adhikari is the eldest, and feels his responsibilities. Though their father earns about Rs 5,000 a month, which by Indian working class standards is a pretty good wage, Rs 2,000 of it goes in interest on their debts - which largely result from the eldest girl's marriage for which they also had to sell what remained of their land in the ancestral village. The next sister brings in a pittance as a private school teacher; and Adhikari himself has done a series of jobs of a clerical kind and as a labour supervisor. It is time for both of these two to get married, but the family cannot afford it while the younger ones are still in full-time education. And being mission-educated, and an office-holder in the Catholic youth organization of the diocese, Adhikari has certain standards to maintain. What he desperately needs is *naukari* (a job with security). With his father to give him a leg up, he has set his sights on the railways; and thanks to his father's foresight (though it caused some trouble with the nuns) he starts with the advantage that his birth certificate says that he is a *Hindu* of Scheduled Caste and that his name does not give

him away. He is therefore 'eligible' to apply for reserved quota jobs (which are not technically open to Christian untouchables); and he has until he is 35 before he reaches the age limit (which is 30 for unreserved posts). But reserved or not, Adhikari takes it as axiomatic that any railway employment costs a minimum of Rs. 40 - 60,000. In the circumstances, that seems like an almost impossible sum.

I have been hearing his endless schemes to circumvent this difficulty at fairly regular intervals over the past five years, but there is only space here for a brief account of a couple of recent moments in the saga. The first occurred when the division advertised the batch of 350 vacancies for Scheduled Caste and Tribe applicants for which Adhikari had long been waiting. He immediately headed off to Bilaspur, the divisional headquarters, where he attended a mass celebrated by a priest he knew through the youth movement. One of the latter's parishioners is 'K. Sahib', a key figure in the railway Personnel Department. Adhikari took the opportunity to renew their previous acquaintance and to get the priest to put in a word for him. On subsequent Sundays he was often in church at Bilaspur and sometimes dropped in at 'K. Sahib's' house. And when he was subsequently summoned for interview, the latter advised him on how to conduct himself. The interview went well, and when he subsequently spoke with his patron on the 'phone he was told that 'it will happen' (*hojaega*). His confidence was further boosted when he heard through the railway grapevine that his name was indeed on the list of selected candidates; and his disappointment was bitter when he found that it did not appear in the subsequently published version. It is true, he is sure, that he had been included originally. But any number of people had had access to the list, and those who did not find their names on it had hurried off to Bilaspur with bundles of banknotes by which he was bumped. His sense of betrayal was total. As a fellow Catholic, 'K. Sahib' should at least have had the decency to tip him off that now was the time for a bribe.

Since then the clock has gone on ticking and Adhikari's sense of urgency has grown. One reason for this is that an offer of marriage had come for his second sister from the family

of an eminently suitable boy. But they could not countenance it because the expected dowry was beyond their capacity. What really concentrated his mind, however, was his father's approaching retirement at the age of 58. At the time of which I write he was coming up for 56, and that gave them only a very small window in which to implement a scheme which they now regarded as Adhikari's best hope. This was to pay the Chief Medical Officer a bribe (estimated at Rs 15,000) to certify that his father is medically unfit for further duty. Provided that the employee has at least two years service left, the rule in such circumstances is that one of his dependants must be offered a job in his place. The dilemma facing the family, however, was that there would inevitably be a gap of at least one year between the time that the father stopped drawing a wage and the time when he would receive his pension and lump-sum Provident Fund pay-out. And it would be even longer before Adhikari himself was taken on. The problem was how to survive the hiatus since Adhikari himself was again unemployed. In the event, however, the retirement age was raised to 60 while they were still considering their course, and this has brought them some respite. In the meantime Adhikari has been in and out of yet another dead-end job.

This family are nowhere near the bottom of the social heap, and I confess that when I started to be privy to their endless plots for securing a job through one corrupt ruse or another my reaction was prim disapproval which I did not quite manage to conceal. But for his part, Adhikari was never quite able to take very seriously the proposition that I several times put to him: that the giver of bribes is also morally culpable. On reflection I begin to see his point. In their desperate quest to keep their heads above water in the status-preoccupied world of their parish, to find respectable homes for their girls and to maintain the family in a modicum of decency, it is irresponsible to be unrealistically fastidious. In some ideal world it may be true that offering a bribe is wrong. But that is not the world which Adhikari sees about him, and he not unreasonably concludes that it is quite unproductive to lose sleep over anything so abstract. As my final case history will show, that is not the conclusion which everyone comes to; but it does I think provide us with the single most important reason for the moral asymmetry. At the retail level, at least,

giving bribes is doing no more than accommodating oneself to brute reality. Adhikari and his family can see no reason to blame themselves for doing their best to preserve what little they have.

We have been hearing the voice of the donor. What has the taker to say for himself? Here I am far less confident, for he is a much more reticent being. Givers declare themselves but receivers in general do not. That in itself is plainly significant, as is the fact that there appears to be no attempt to turn the tables by placing the moral onus on the donor. Rather what people say is that if I don't take, the next fellow will. So why should I deny myself when I too have a family to provide for, and when my subordinates have probably ruined my reputation already by demanding back-handers in my name? The manager and the clerk is more or less assumed to 'eat' bribes, and if one's reputation is likely to be tarnished anyway one might as well take the benefits. By reputation at least, I know of two particular BSP officers who are said to have started late; and that was only when they discovered that those under them had long been demanding in their names. And conversely, of course, if the boss is corrupt, then why shouldn't I? It would at any rate just be asking for trouble to blow the whistle on others when those above me are in on the act and taking a rake off themselves. Since it takes some nerve to be really corrupt, it is with their toughest and most ruthless colleagues that the virtuous have to contend.

This idea that it is pre-eminently the taker of the bribe who is morally imperilled has some resonance with traditional Hindu cultural ideas about gifts. The religious gift - the gift of *dan* or *dakshina* - contains the sins of the donor which corrupt the recipient body and soul, and result in untold misfortune unless proper expiatory steps are taken (Parry 1989; 1994: chapter 4). When the lineman solicits a bribe for connecting your electricity supply he is apt to ask for *dan-dakshina*. Moreover the dangers involved in accepting both types of prestation are sometimes represented in strikingly similar terms. Bhagvan Das - a junior official in the Special Area Development Authority and a Brahman - once told me how he had come to the conclusion that honesty is best policy. He had learned from experience - his first and last bribe. The sum was trivial and he had spent it on lunch. By mid-afternoon it had made him violently ill and he took

himself home, only to find that his house had been burgled. The connection he drew was explicit - he had not been able to 'digest' his immoral earnings which had directly resulted in sickness and misfortune. And that of course is exactly the way in which orthodox Brahmans talk about the dangers of *dan*. But there is an important rider to this example. Bhagvan Das's wife works for SADA as well, and judging by her reputation does not share in his scruples. Nor does his closest friend in the office, who in terms of family misfortune has had far more reason to contemplate the dangers.

In any event, it would certainly be implausible to claim that the greater moral culpability of the *bribe-taker* is *simply* a carry-over from scriptural ideas about gifts. That *may* be one small part of the story, but as I have already suggested a far more significant factor is the idea that corruption is everywhere. If it is true that I cannot accomplish the most routine of bureaucratic tasks without greasing a palm, then I can hardly be blamed for swallowing hard and paying up. It is not difficult to see how the belief becomes the reality. Functionaries become corrupt because everybody assumes that they are; and everybody pays because everybody assumes that they must. And at the level of pragmatic effects, an increase in the volume of corrupt earnings (which must be hidden from official view by being given out as loans and marriage payments) leads to new asymmetries of power within neighbourhood and kinship groups, and encourages the inflation of dowries. And in turn, of course, inflated dowry demands encourage harassed fathers with marriageable daughters and the right opportunities to add to their earnings, and also incidentally to judge the prospects of suitable boys by what they and their fathers can make 'on top'.

Yet even in the most corrupt administrative departments, there are individuals who have a reputation for resolutely refusing bribes - in defiance of the apparently rational principle that if you can't beat them you may as well join them. More precisely, we should distinguish (in ascending order of moral culpability) between 'gifts', 'commissions' and 'bribes'. Take the BSP Purchase Department. Provided it is not embarrassingly extravagant, not even the most scrupulous clerk or manager refuses an unsolicited 'gift' on the occasion of one of the major

festivals from the company representatives with whom they regularly deal. To do so would be a denial of reasonable working relations. But the less scrupulous *solicit* 'gifts', placing orders for a fancy new camera from Calcutta, for example; or allow themselves to be persuaded that it is really far more sensible to accept cash so that they can get something of their own choosing. The 'commission' is a fixed rate percentage on the value of all contracts - so much to the clerk, so much to his immediate superior, so much to the manager in charge of the section. (For a contract issued by SADA, which administers the urban area outside the purpose-built BSP township, I was for example told the precise percentages of its value supposedly due to each of seven different levels in the bureaucratic hierarchy). As one friend who has actually operated the system explained it: while the 'gift' is for having invitations to tender placed in your way; the 'commission' is for getting the order, and the 'bribe' - a negotiable amount - is paid for passing substandard goods or sanctioning payments for phantom supplies. But another way of seeing it would be as a continuum from diffuseness to specificity. That is, the 'gift' is for maintaining social relations rather than for any specific favour; the 'commission' is in 'gratitude' for servicing the contract, while the 'bribe' is for a fairly narrowly defined instrumental purpose to do with some modification to its precise conditions. Purchase is one of BSP's most infamous departments, yet even here there are managers who are reputed to accept only unsolicited gifts - though in practice of course the judgement between what is a 'gift' and what is a 'bribe' may be a very fine call. A crucial consideration, as one of these told me, is not just the price of the item but the ease with which it can be reconverted into cash. The higher is liquidity, the more suspicious one should be.

Where do such scruples come from? Bhagvan Das has already supplied us with one answer (the evil consequences attendant on accepting such money). But I guess that most of his colleagues are more likely to be swayed by the fear of getting caught than by the fear of an upset stomach - even if the bolder spirits amongst them might shrug off even the first of these risks on the calculation that the Vigilance officer is only human and can probably be bought, and that disciplinary proceedings are so protracted that most cases get buried eventually. There is, however, a further possibility which interests me more but which is hard to pin down

convincingly: that some individuals refuse to take bribes because they sincerely believe that the impersonal rules of bureaucracy are in principle fair and just, and that nobody has the moral right to pervert them for personal advantage. While the objective circumstances in which individuals find themselves, and the belief that everybody else is at it, provide powerful incentives to participate in the culture of corruption, there are at least some who try (perhaps unsuccessfully) to resist that culture in the name of moral imperatives based on universalistic notions of justice and equity.

Case history 3

Now in his mid thirties, Krishna lives in the untouchable quarter of what was once small rural village but is now an industrial 'slum'. Born and brought up in the Kerala countryside, he is an Irava by caste, traditionally Toddy-tappers but upwardly mobile throughout this century and now free of the stigma of untouchability. His father was one of eight brothers and had migrated to Sri Lanka in the 1950s where he earned his living making country cigarettes (*birhis*). But by the 'sixties Sri Lanka had become an uncomfortable place for Indian workers, and Krishna's father moved on to Bhilai. One of his elder brothers had gone there when the plant was still under construction, patrolling the site with a large kettle selling tea to the workers. Eventually the whole sibling group followed, Krishna's father starting a small poultry farm in the ex-village in which they now live.

The twenty-two children of that generation were all brought up by the womenfolk back home in Kerala in a single joint household under the benign eye of their grandmother and the rather more ferocious gaze of her eldest son who had by now returned to the ancestral *taravad*. A childhood of swimming, catching snakes, climbing palm trees and avoiding his uncle is how Krishna nostalgically recalls it today. But the idyll ended abruptly when, at 16, he was shipped off to Bhilai to live with a father he hardly ever seen.

When he first came, Krishna knew very little Hindi and it is not surprising that he dropped out of school after only one year to help his father with the hens he was supposed to inherit. But his heart was plainly not in it, and he was soon devoting most of his energies to the Communist Party youth organization, to designing banners and posters advocating "Support for the Front Line States" and "Freedom for Mandela", setting up a blood donor group, a Marxist study circle for the lads of the neighbourhood, a chess club and small paper-back library which after his month at the People's Youth Federation Congress in North Korea included a hard back version of the complete works of Kim-II-Sung. But that trip was also the beginning of his disillusionment with the Party, not - he now grins - because North Korea fell short of a People's Paradise, but because of the days spent on the way in the party headquarters in Delhi, where he was shocked by the shady dealing and the constant finding of jobs for the boys. But the final cap on his discontent was when the local branch of AITUC (the union affiliated to the Party) sent in its own blackleg labour to break a major strike called by a rival union on the Bhilai industrial estate.

The poultry farm went bust in 1991. The market was glutted, the feed-suppliers were cheats and the birds diseased. The debts amounted to Rs 200,000, and the property could not be sold because of complications over the legal title. Krishna now really needed a job. At this point his classificatory *mausar* - his MZHB - a clerk in the BSP Purchase Department and their principal creditor, intervened and got him a job as the assistant to the Bhilai representative of a Calcutta company which supplied gear-boxes for BSP cranes and rolling equipment. And that was Krishna's second initiation into the wickedness of the world. The formal duties of the company representative are to establish which orders his company might be invited to tender for, collect intelligence about the likely competition and get the company's bills cleared through the BSP bureaucracy. What much of his work actually entails, however, is operating the system of "gifts", "commissions" and "bribes", and knowing which officers should be offered what. Despite the considerable diplomacy which his duties require, and the large sums of money he often handles, the representative is paid a paltry wage. The assumption is that he

supplements it through *do nambari kam* ("number two work") - through submitting, for example, an inflated account of the sums expended on under-the-counter payments.

First time round Krishna lasted about a year before he left the company in disgust - the last straw being when he discovered that his immediate superior had booked a hotel room in his name in which a couple of prostitutes were to entertain their clients. He next went into the scrap-trade, which was out of the frying pan into the fire. The profit is in metals, and apart from the legitimate scrap that comes the dealer's way, a huge amount of high quality iron and steel is smuggled out of BSP by sundry ingenious means. The dealers (*karbadis*) are consequently subject to frequent visits from the police and, however legitimate their business, could not survive without paying for their indulgence. That, combined with a slump in the market brought about by cheap imports, was what drove Krishna out of that business with a further burden of debt. In the meantime the Calcutta engineering company had discovered that their former frontline representative had been diverting BSP orders to a new company of his own. His position was vacant and Krishna was pressed to take it on. This time he lasted about 18 months before finally walking out when the company asked him to take payment from BSP of Rs 400,000 on the strength of a phoney shipping bill for goods which had not even been manufactured, let alone dispatched.

Krishna's most recent attempt to establish himself with a secure means of livelihood was his attempt to set up a small-scale industry making bricks in a village about 35 kilometres from Bhilai. From family and friends he managed to mobilise just enough capital to lease a rather over-ambitious amount of land, to hire in a gang of Satnami labourers from the neighbouring district of Bilaspur and a man of Potter caste who claimed to have brick-making experience to supervise them, and to start production. But the business was under-capitalised, and in order to sustain it he had to apply to a rural co-operative bank for a substantial loan under a special Government scheme intended to finance such small-scale enterprises. But the money was extremely slow in coming through, and a percentage

was demanded for overlooking the fact that as the resident of an urban area Krishna was not strictly eligible to apply to the scheme. Very soon too, the nascent brick-works started to attract the official attention of the Land Revenue Department, the local Industries Office and the Mines Department - all of whom suspected that it was in breach of some regulation or other, though for a certain consideration these problems could of course be sorted out quite speedily. That, combined with a fortnight of unseasonable rain which completely ruined a large batch of bricks which were about to be fired, decided him to wind the enterprise up.

Over the time that I have known him, Krishna has been deeply troubled by two other major problems concerned with corruption. The first of these arose out of a dispute his father had had with an Untouchable neighbour who had tried to encroach on their land. The neighbour filed a report at the special police station (colloquially known as the "Harijan Thana") which deals with crimes against members of the Scheduled Castes alleging that Krishna and his father had abused and insulted him by calling him a 'Chamar' (a man of Leather-worker caste), and that Krishna had threatened to assault him. Nobody in the neighbourhood took these allegations seriously, and Krishna himself claimed that he had not seen the man for weeks. But the police decided to press charges, though the Brahman inspector in charge of the station sent word they would be dropped on payment of Rs 3,000. Krishna paid, whereupon his father called a press conference at which he read a statement - forwarded to the Chief Minister, Collector and sundry senior police officials - denouncing the harassment and corruption of the local "Harijan Thana". Krishna was beside himself with anger. They had not a scrap of hard evidence to support their side of the story, and the police have ways of making life extremely unpleasant for those who really cross them.

The second problem concerned his sister's husband, a morosely somnolent individual who was turning out badly. Krishna had always opposed the match, but his father had insisted because the boy had supposedly been selected already for a BSP job. Whether this was

in fact true remained unclear for months. Endlessly waiting for his call from the plant, Gopal - the husband - had become involved in a teak smuggling racket and it was suspected that he was now being blackmailed. Krishna's sister's jewellery had been pawned and Krishna himself was endlessly hassled - with veiled hints that his sister might otherwise suffer - for money he did not have. The only obvious solution was for him to reactivate his old party contacts, approach a prominent leader in the AITUC - the recognised union in the BSP mines - and ask him to ensure that Gopal's job materialized as soon as possible. This would probably have been well within this unionist's power, for it was widely supposed that he had already obliged several others including members of his own family. But it stuck in Krishna's throat and he agonised for days before finally deciding on the compromise of merely asking for information about his brother-in-law's position in the queue.

Though these days politically inactive, Krishna continues to be endlessly asked for his help by the young men of the neighbourhood when they need a more confident voice in their dealings with the bureaucracy. Ramesh, for example, had paid Rs 5,000 to one of the Durg employment officers for a BSP interview "call letter". None came, so Ramesh consulted Krishna, who went with him and his original witness to confront the official. When that failed to have any effect, he button-holed a lawyer's clerk he knew and they all went together to register a complaint with the police. The official then took fright and Ramesh got his money back. But to Krishna's absolute fury, the sequel was that Ramesh thereupon offered him a percentage. When that was refused, his friend avoided him for weeks, on the apparent miscalculation that he was holding out for more. "They can't understand", he protested. "They just think I am just some *dalal*."

What I hope that this case history conveys is not only something of how difficult it is to avoid being sucked into the world of bureaucratic corruption, but how there are at least some who - at not inconsiderable personal cost - refuse to acquiesce in it or accord it any kind of moral legitimacy. Though Krishna can hardly be represented as a typical instance, he is certainly not

alone in his ethical unease about the corrupt transactions in which circumstances have forced him to participate, and in his commitment to a more universalistic set of values. And that brings me back to the problem I posed at the start.

Corruption and the state: towards a tentative conclusion

Though on the ethnography I have presented it would certainly be rash to deny that retail corruption has probably grown over the past thirty years, I am nevertheless struck by a certain disjunction between the belief in, and the actual evidence for, its all-pervasiveness. Even where it is reputedly most rampant there are those who resist it; and even though it is an article of faith that you cannot get a job with the largest public sector employer in the area without paying for it, there is reason to suppose that most of those who have such jobs did not do so. And if popular discourse is prone to inflate the practice, I have tried to draw attention to some of the mechanisms by which this magnification might be produced: to the way in which the relationship between patrons and brokers might magically multiply its real incidence; to the way in which the *dalal* can appear to have done his job without actually doing anything, and to the way in which the belief is protected by secondary elaborations. But there is a good deal more to be said, and a significant part of it would have to do with the power and visibility of the state.

Both have expanded enormously in the period since Independence. The state now reaches into areas it had previously left largely alone and has assumed the role of a gargantuan development agency. The bureaucracy has mushroomed and so have the responsibilities with which it is charged. Given that retail corruption was hardly unknown to British India, it is scarcely surprising that the experience of it is today more widespread - and this would be so even if the proportion of corrupt officials had actually declined. Unless you have electricity, the lineman is rather unlikely to ask you for *chay-pani* ('tea-water'); unless you have a school in the vicinity you probably will not need to pay a bribe for an examination certificate.

Not only that, but the massive expansion of newsprint and broadcast media makes what goes on in the corridors of power in Bhopal and Delhi, or even on the Bombay Stock Exchange,

much more visible to a massive public outside the metropolitan areas. And much of what does go on can hardly fail to seem increasingly unsavoury as one high-profile scandal follows another at ever decreasing intervals. Bofors, St.Kitts, Harshad Mehta and the securities scam, Sukh Ram and the 22 suitcases of banknotes in his *puja* room, invoices for moving buffaloes by moped in the Bihar fodder scam, the Jain *hawala* case - not a few of my informants can recite the litany and many have followed the last with interest since the Jain brothers are amongst the biggest industrialists in Bhilai. The trail, they will know, led from funds for arming Kashmiri militants, to illegal foreign currency transactions, to the owners of the Bhilai Engineering Corporation whose pay-roll was alleged to have included one President of India, two Prime Ministers, one Deputy Prime Minister, two state Governors, nine chief ministers and 30 union ministers¹¹. And they also know that the *quid pro quo* is said to have been contracts for the company and that what was a scandal in Delhi was jobs on the line in Bhilai. The rot, they conclude, has reached the very top and it is not surprising if they suspect that it must therefore be everywhere else. The fact that very few of the people named in any of these cases have yet been convicted of corruption is just proof of how bad things are. The possibility that any might be innocent seems unworthy of serious consideration.

Though in some cases this possibility admittedly requires a considerable leap of imagination, the outsider may perhaps be forgiven for wondering if the *presumption* of guilt might not be ideologically over-determined. Could it be that there is something 'in the culture' which predisposes Indians to think poorly of their public figures? Remember Kautilya's much-cited warning: 'Just as it is impossible not to taste the honey or poison that finds itself at the tip of the tongue, so it is impossible for a government servant not to eat up, at least, a bit of the king's revenue' (p.71). Or Dumont (1970) on the 'strict disjunction' between the moral order of *dharma* and the politico-economic domain of *artha*, the latter being peripheral to the core values and therefore easily seen as a realm of amoral egoistic self-seeking. But in that case what about Gandhi or Vinoba Bhave? Or is the tradition of the saintly politician that they represent itself partly to blame, as Morris-Jones has proposed that it could be? If, as Mayer's fine piece (1981) on the ideology of *seva* might also suggest, the ideal is set too high, then ordinary

mortals will inevitably judged as falling very far short, and may even conclude that one 'might as well be hung for a whole big black market sheep as for a little irregular lamb' (Morris-Jones 1960). And that it gets worse and worse all the time is perhaps the problem with time itself. It runs down. Though I do not wish to altogether discount considerations of this kind, we should not forget that ideas can change and that when they do not we must try to account for their continued rhetorical force. Nor should we lose sight of the fact that, without the benefits of Hindu cosmology, contemporary Indonesians and Nigerians are probably just as cynically critical of the modern state - the obvious reason for which is that it simply does not work in the way that it is supposed to.

In the case of India, its failures are widely explained as the consequence of the population at large having never really bought into its values. As Gill (1998:230) puts it, 'the greatest weakness of our polity (is that) we enshrined in the Constitution a value system which was never internalized, and which was external to the Indian ethos'. Much of the blame belongs to the institution of caste which inhibits the acceptance of an impersonal and universalistic set of moral norms (ibid. p. 253). Others would focus on kinship. 'Somewhere', says Visvanathan, 'in the nexus of state and family lie the problems of modern India' (in Visvanathan and Sethi 1998:38). The impersonal norms of the modern bureaucratic state apparatus are continually subverted by the particularistic obligations of traditional kinship. Or alternatively, the civil servant has not yet quite committed himself to the first, but has opted out of the second, with the result that he feels free to concentrate on the lining of his own pocket (Morris-Jones 1964:62-3). Whichever variant one chooses, the 'crisis of corruption' is a symptom of the weakness of the state and of the Nehruvian 'idea of India'.

I would like to argue the opposite. At one level the point has already been made - that the widening *experience* of corruption is an almost inevitable corollary of the expanded reach of the state. But at another level it must also be testimony to an internalization of its norms and values. If corruption is the misuse of public office or assets for private interest, then the notion obviously presupposes a clear conceptual separation between the two. In the administration of

the Mughal empire no sharp distinction was drawn. Many officials received, not a salary, but a share of the revenue; and *dastur* ('custom') and *mamul* ('usual practice') and other like payments that would today be 'corrupt' were taken as a matter of legitimate right. 'It needed rational legal authority with the idea of public office, impersonal rules and the demarcation of public and private, office and home, to create the discourse of corruption as we know it. Corruption is the theatre that conflates these opposites' (Visvanathan and Sethi 1998:5). In contemporary India even the most *brasht* (corrupt) of *babus* (clerks) understands that perfectly well and looks over his shoulder nervously as he pockets his 'fee'. There is a 'public' domain, of which the state is supposed to act as guardian, and the appropriation of it by private interest has increasingly become a source of real resentment. An electrical contractor, with extensive experience of both public and private sector work, once assured me - with much circumstantial detail - that in terms of corruption there is not a whisker between them. 'But the difference', he went on, 'is that people do not mind it so much in the private sector. They do not think it is theirs.' Moreover, the idea that this 'public' should be quite inclusively defined (that women, untouchables and tribals belong in it too) has some appeal in a highly cosmopolitan town like Bhillai. When the alternative is that the jobs will go to Biharis, Brahmans or devotees of Sai Baba, the principle of an impersonal and impartial procedure for allocating them is not without appeal in such a socially heterogeneous world. What I am suggesting, then, is that the idea of a 'crisis of corruption' may be as much a product of a growing acceptance of universalistic bureaucratic norms as of its actual increase. Corruption has seemed to get worse and worse not (only) because it has, but also because subverts a set of values to which people are increasingly committed.

But there is, of course, a paradox. If the 'crisis' is partly a precipitate of the strength of the modern democratic state, it could also prove its Achilles' heel. As I have suggested, the belief that corruption is all-pervasive can all too easily turn into the reality; and it has the potential to corrode what remains of the faith in Nehru's 'idea of India'. And if that were to happen, the most likely outcome is that the power of the state would remain, that the victim would be democracy and the end result a new and more sinister species of corruption.

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Footnotes :

1. This has been undertaken at various intervals between September 1993 and April 1999, and I gratefully acknowledge the support of the Nuffield Foundation, the Economic and Social Research Council and the London School of Economics which made it possible. Special thanks are also due to Ajay T.G. for research assistance which has made an invaluable contribution to the broader study.

2. On the relationship between corruption, liberalization and democracy, see the useful collection edited by Harriss-White and White (1996).

3. This situation is not unparalleled. Focus group discussions on corruption held in four erstwhile Soviet-bloc countries in 1996 revealed a similar disjunction (Grodland, Koshechkina and Miller n.d.).

4. For a detailed discussion of BSP work regimes, see Parry 1999a.

5. Since the mid-1990s there have been cut-backs of around ten per cent in the BSP labour force. In 1987 the total workforce had been 63,400.

6. I use pseudonyms throughout. I will have more to say about the employment history of 'Somvaru's' family below; and other aspects of his household economy are discussed in some detail in Parry 1999b.

7. These are the quotas set for recruitment through the local employment exchanges. For a detailed discussion of the reservations policy in relation to BSP employment, see Parry 1999b.

8. But neither skiving nor moonlighting are themselves described as 'corrupt' (*brasht*), and the weakness of both formal and informal sanctions against them is striking (Parry 1999a).

9. The moral indignation of the short-changed bribe-giver was memorably illustrated by the loud complaints of Lakhubhai Pathak, the London-based pickle manufacturer, when he failed to get a Government of India contract for the import of newsprint and paper-pulp. He sued the celebrated 'god-man' Chandraswami as the intermediary who was supposed to have brokered the deal with Prime Minister Narasimha Rao. It is also significant that Harshad Mehta, the infamous broker in the Bombay securities scam, felt able to openly accuse Narasimha Rao in a press conference of accepting from him Rs 10 million which he had personally delivered in a suitcase. The Prevention of Corruption Act of 1988 appears to be principally concerned with the *taking* of illegal gratifications.

10. The trade union affiliated to the CPI(M).

11. For detailed accounts of the Jain *hawala* case, see Gill (1998: 104f) and Singh (1999:162f).