Cosmologies and Corruption in (South) India – Thinking Aloud

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A seminar on corruption in Oslo, organised by Transparency International in October 1999, indicated the existence of two schools of thought in the international debate. Some participants appeared to imply that corruption in governance and business could be controlled through universal techniques, while others emphasised that corruption needs to be analysed in its historical and cultural contexts and, thus, may require particularistic approaches to management. Economist Petter Langseth seemed to take the universalist approach when he several times asserted that ‘We already know the causes of corruption’ (Frøystad, informal report from seminar). Langseth did not specify what he thought the causes of corruption to be, so it would be unfair at this point to take him to task. However, it seems to be the case that many observers (including the writers of articles in Indian English-language newspapers) assume that the unvarnished, straightforward desire for added income is the first cause, combined with the inadequate internalisation of bureaucratic norms. Falling as I do in the camp urging historical and cultural contextualisation, I seek to point out that in India, at least, some kinds of corruption are a function of complex cultural dynamics involving notions of the ontology of ranks and statuses, of the nature of authority, and of personal evaluation in political competition. I examine corrupt action in the context of systems of belief and practice which have historical antecedents.

Note of acknowledgements. I presented this paper at a conference of the Nordic Association of South Asian Studies at the University of Gothenburg in August 1999, and in October 1999, at a meeting in Raleigh, North Carolina, of the South Asia Consortium, made up of scholars from North Carolina State University, Duke University and the University of North Carolina. I am grateful for participants’ comments and for those of Helge Pharo in revising the work here. I am also grateful to Kathinka Frøystad of PRIO, who supplied me with her notes from the Oslo seminar on corruption 21–22 October 1999 which I could not attend. Ketil Fred Hansen of Kirkens Nødhjelp also came with useful comments. A grant last autumn, 1998, through the Norwegian Research Council programme, Public Administration in Developing Societies, allowed me to develop some of the points presented here.
I hope with the arguments below to indicate that those in my camp can go further than to spin ever more refined definitions of corruption or to discuss mainly how people think about it, a complaint which Fredrik Galtung raised during the seminar (Frøystad, informal report from seminar).¹ My next step will be to work out how the elaboration of this work can assist in the practical management of corruption in India.

In the winter and spring of 1997–98, reading English-language daily newspapers in Bangalore, South India, I found a constant topic to be corruption, with attending dismay over the possibilities of controlling it. The corruption of politicians was a major target, as were the demands of public servants for extra payment in carrying out what should have been their regular line of duty. Occasionally there was mention that corrupt activities of businessmen could easily compete in range with politicians and bureaucrats, but this was not commonly discussed in the dailies. Evidence of this type of corruption may be less obvious and more difficult to secure.

It seems that economists have taken the lead in recent research on corruption worldwide (The Economist, 16 January 1999). However, they tend to work with aggregate figures. What is needed, if effective measures of prevention and reform are to be developed, is disaggregative research that, among other topics, deals with the motives and political ideas that influence the choices of participants in corrupt actions. Close analysis of the contexts in which citizens, politicians, public servants and businessmen participate can sometimes give beneficial results. This is indicated by an article by John Toye and Mick Moore in a recent issue of the European Journal of Development Research in which they discuss a tax reform in Indonesia (Toye and Moore, 1998).

While political scientists sometimes engage in research on corruption and development, it would seem to be anthropologists who are taken up with the challenges of the new field, the anthropology of the state. They may be in the best position to come with useful observations on culture and corruption. As far as India is concerned, Akhil Gupta made an early contribution with an article published in 1995 (Gupta, 1995).² However, as John Harriss noted at a recent conference

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¹ The general definition of corruption which Transparency International is using, ‘the abuse of entrusted power’, is adequate for the purposes of this article.
² A recent paper by Arild Engelsen Ruud (Ruud, 1998) should be an important contribution to the international discourse when (if) it is published in a journal that brings it out to an international audience.
on the anthropology of the South Asian state, this subfield of anthropology still has some distance to go in developing methods of approach (Harriss, 1998). Historians of South Asia, who usually leave discussions of contemporary development to political scientists and anthropologists, have been the slowest of the disciplines to engage in recent scholarly debates about corruption. In the paper here I come with some observations which result from research from the point of view of cultural history, based on study of Tamil- and Kannada-speaking areas in South India.

In making comments about political ideas and values, I do not mean to place human action in a straightjacket of cultural determinism. Evidence that different sectors of the Indian bureaucracy perform differently when it comes to corrupt practice suggests that historical contingency and institutional factors can play a role in determining levels of corruption. For example Francesco Kjellberg found high standards of administrative practice in the Tamil Nadu state bureaucracy’s efforts at pollution control, while Hans Blomkvist’s work on the administration of public housing gave different results (Kjellberg, personal communication; Blomkvist, 1988). Efforts to effect wide-ranging social change, however, need to base themselves on knowledge of social and political rationalities and I hope my comments will be taken as a contribution in that direction.

Discussions of culture and corruption usually focus around the significance of gifting in post-colonial societies (Kjellberg, 1992:216). In this paper I suggest that some types of corruption are embedded in complexes of political ideas which encompass gift-giving and which also include notions of the appropriate exertion of authority and distribution of resources. A major aim here is to outline conceptions of political space, notions of manoeuvrability, which inform the choices of many politicians and bureaucrats. This paper is mostly about political cosmologies with special reference to notions of personal authority and the appropriate distribution of material resources.

From the point of view of legal culture, India is pluralistic. The institutions of the modern state developed during more than 150 years of political consolidation under the British Empire and thus bear marks of attachment to western-style notions of universal law codes and regulations of bureaucratic procedure. The post-colonial governing institutions of the central and state governments have not formally departed from models of universalism in codes. The informal institutions of local societies, on the other hand, are still influenced by the legal pluralism of widespread social segmentation.
A large body of anthropological literature provides ample evidence of well-developed, unwritten codes for conduct playing major roles in guiding the choices of Indians in their everyday life. These codes constitute guides to appropriate action for actors in families, clans, sub-castes, and sects, and affect economic and political exchanges in broader arenas. The particularistic codes of clans, sub-caste, sects and different religious groups compete in various ways with the universalistic claims of rules of modern governance.3

Newspaper reportage and studies of local politics in India show that particularistic considerations – attention to the claims of social and ethnic groups in localities – affect administrative practice. A public servant is confronted with a wide range of pressing demands for action which are not described in official rules and regulations. Behind these demands lie assumptions of appropriate action according to a complicated range of unwritten, local codes. These assumptions are in conflict with the demands for universal responsibility and ‘fair treatment’ which, theoretically, underlie the aims of public policy in India’s liberal democracy.

The political practice of politicians also shows influence of legal pluralism fitting awkwardly with the demands of the state. A simple example of this tension is the necessity for a politician in a legislative assembly to support, at least part of the time, not only the interests of the locality he represents, but also the claims of his community, or risk losing its support – which can be vital depending on the communal make-up of the electors in his constituency. Politicians are not only faced with the usual constituency demands concerning, say, a new road, improved irrigation works, the installation of public health clinics, etc. They have also to balance the interests of a complex array of social and religious groups. These demands will vary with the size, economic status and interests, and education of communities, including their own. Citizens may complain about the nepotism and partisan tendencies of politicians in the abstract, at the same time as they feel that they are justified in getting favourable terms of support for themselves and their kin in approaching a politician from the same community.

There are other implications of social segmentation and legal pluralism. As mentioned above, we can see the existence of competing codes as a reason for the widespread contestation of bureaucratic norms in many sections of Indian society. In this context it may be useful to take into consideration as well the concept of political segmentation. While social segmentation refers to the constitution of

3. A recent discussion of legal pluralism in India is Saberwal (1996).
4. I will use the word ‘his’ below, rather than the more cumbersome ‘his or her’.
social relations in micro-units of kin-linked people, political segmentation refers to the constitution of political relations in factions and other types of informal domains of power, influence and authority.

Political segmentation has a long history in India. The regional kingdoms, little kingdoms and chieftaincies which characterised rulership in 17th and 18th century India, even under the mantle of the Mughal Empire, were unevenly bureaucratised in their political practice and organisation. From South Indian studies comes the concept ‘segmentary state’ to characterise the levels of decentralisation and reliance on local lordship in these unstable polities (Stein, 1977). In the abstract, the political segmentation we find in Indian politics today shares characteristics with pre-colonial forms, without being in any direct line of political descent. To discuss why this should be the case is beyond the scope of this paper, but I try to outline some elements of contemporary segmentation below. I hope thereby to suggest that corrupt actions result not just from a straightforward desire for material aggrandisement, but are also or even primarily important tools for political negotiation and the achievement and/or protection of unstable rank and status. These actions take place in political landscapes which, while they are not completely unfamiliar compared to those we know in Western Europe, require guides for most travellers for the clarification of formations and the specification of pitfalls.

Thinking about political and social segmentation gives rise to two issues to consider in analysing Indian political culture: (1) the nature of rank and status in a society without a long history of extended, regional bureaucratic centralisation, and (2) related to this, different kinds of domains of power and authority which can appear in societies which have a long history of decentralised political processes. In considering these issues I offer a model which highlights (and exaggerates) differences in political and administrative belief and practice between Western Europe and India. This brief comparison should indicate the scope for negotiation and manoeuvre which exists for politicians in the unstable world of Indian politics. Understanding the context in which much political corruption takes place requires that we examine both the ways in which politicians relate to rivals and the nature of the political space which is fought over. Less is known about

5. Political segmentation in South Indian political history is a topic of my Kingship and Political Practice in Colonial South India (1996), passim.

6. I use the terms ‘rank and status’ because, while both refer to evaluation in relationships, rank suggests (somewhat) institutionalised hierarchies and status refers to less institutionalised perceptions of difference and value.
infighting in the offices and corridors of state and national bureaucracies.

Ranking in political negotiation and exchange in Western Europe is affected by the absolute value (relatively speaking) which is attached to formal positions and titles in the bureaucratic structures that organise so much of our existence. In Western Europe one finds commonly that a careful delineation of areas of responsibility and attention to due process in the management of affairs characterise bureaucratic thinking. Such thinking affects perceptions of the ontology of ranks and statuses in political parties and in governance in Western Europe. Ranks and statuses in general are less negotiable, more stable in the influence and authority they imply, than is the case in politics and governance in India.

In India bureaucratic rationality is highly contested and areas of influence and responsibility overlap in party organisation and in governance. In India ranks and statuses tend to be personal and relative, dependent on contexts and contingencies. Relationships of political rank and status can be more fluid and unstable than in societies where bureaucratic thinking has long provided norms for the management of human affairs. As a corollary to this, rank and status – being relatively and contextually determined – are more personal in both their constitution and in the perceptions of actors. They are more reflective of personal contingencies than rank and status in more bureaucratised polities. Such a situation makes for highly volatile, unstable relations in political exchange, where emotions run high. Honour is more important than formal rank and is more dependent on context, though formal rank is included in the constitution of honour. Honour is a status tied to a person, reflecting his informal influence and power as well as his formal position. Conflicts over honour are conflicts involving negotiable, unstable status and competition for authority and influence.

How does the second point about domains of authority and power fit in here? Take the case of Karnataka. At the time of independence in 1947 political ties between locality bosses in rural communities and the politicians and bureaucrats in the capital city, Bangalore, were relatively limited. Over the next decade this situation changed as Chief Ministers opened up possibilities for the distribution of spoils among their partymen in the districts (Manor, 1978). During this period and into the 1960s rural bosses could count on chains of patron–client relations in rural society reaching down to lower social strata working as

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7. Ranks in Indian bureaucracy can certainly be rigid, but bureaucratic rank does not subsume the total, informal evaluation of the person in the hierarchy.
vote banks. However, as elsewhere in India, poor and low status voters came to discover the power which lay in a secret ballot, and new political leadership emerged to challenge those entrenched in power in the Congress Party. Domains of authority and power shifted from being made up of relatively stable and predictable patron–client relations to what anthropologist Mark Holmström, following Adrian Mayer, has called action-sets (Holmström, 1969, 1988).

Action-sets are the networks of heterogeneous relations which constitute domains of influence and fragile control for both district and capital city politicians. These domains cross formal boundaries between state and society, as bureaucrats do favours for or are served by politicians. They overlap in different directions as when businessmen, say, develop transactional relations with not one, but several bureaucrats and politicians simultaneously. As Holmström pointed out in his work from Karnataka in the 1960s, action-sets – what I am calling political domains – can have an ethic, and the ethic in these fluid domains is organised in part around notions of personal honour and mutual respect. Rank and status in this context – encompassing notions of (personal) honour and respect – are a function of fluidity in political relations and have an ontology in structures which allow for relative as opposed to absolute meaning.

Informal networks of power, influence and authority play a role in political transactions in Western Europe, in university – for example – as well as parliamentary politics. The major difference I point to between Western Europe and India in this regard is that in the former more attention is paid to due process. Constitutional and bureaucratic procedures are more closely adhered to. Where due process is not so deeply institutionalised in political consciousness, ranks are relative in meaning (open to intense and volatile negotiation), personal honour plays an important role in political and administrative exchange, and political domains have fluid boundaries. The preoccupation which actors show with evaluation of their person by others – their personal social and political value in this highly personalised political cosmology of shifting relations – is in part what is called honour.

Where do notions of honour come from? It is important to spend some time with this issue since honor – and, as I discuss later, the lordship it implies – plays an important part in political cosmologies in India. Newspapers and magazines in India, for example, contain regular references by politicians to alleged acts of humiliation by others which require them to respond so as to regain their self-respect (Price, 1999). (Curiously, writers in English-language newspapers and maga-
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In investigating the formation of conventional conceptions of honour and respect, we need to think in terms of the administration of the affairs of the kin-linked, micro-units which constituted segmented society in India. Specifically, it is necessary to examine major ideas in the administration of interpersonal interactions as families, large and small, work to sustain themselves and celebrate the life passages of their members.

Most discussions about segmented society in India have focused on the way in which caste has been associated with the occupation of a group, on the rules which determine which castes can eat together and on the rules which regulate marriage within caste groups. In considering the source of ideas of leadership, it is important to investigate notions which guide the management of social interaction in these social segments.\(^8\) Here we find basic ideas of authority in political relations among ordinary people. These conceptions support the solidarity of the kin groups, imposing a kind of discipline among family members, making it possible for social segmentation to reproduce itself over generations.

Administration is carried out in face-to-face relationships in which age and gender are important determinants of the formal hierarchy, the face which the unit shows the world. The head of the segment unit is properly the oldest male and he is supposed to rule; he is not simply a manager. His rule is personal and he commands personal respect and honour in recognition of his position. This respect is shown through a range of behaviours of subordination appropriate to the age and gender of the members of the family. The father, for example, eats first, with his wife waiting on him. Children will bow down to their parents on special occasions. Sons will not smoke in the presence of their father and, more to the point, will see it as their duty to obey him and do as he wishes, or at least to give the impression of doing so. Daughters and daughters-in-law should be particularly submissive in following the will of both the mother and father.

The position of the head of the family is supported by ideologies of honour and responsibility which are also found in the worship and ritual of the sub-caste. Gods and goddesses in Hinduism, in particular, are conceived of as kings with royal consorts. These rule the village or town where their temple is found, as well as the universe. Generally

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\(^8\) The following discussion I take from the many accounts I have read of kin relations among conventional Indians in rural and urban areas. Of particular use is the work of Doranne Jacobson (1982: 81–109).
worship consists of acts of honouring the god and/or goddess, addressing them respectfully, offering them food and gifts, adorning them. The father in a family is thought of in terms which resemble the family deity which, properly honoured, protects the family. We can see this relationship in the way wives traditionally are supposed to regard their husbands. For many women her husband is like her god or is said to be her god. She will think of him and approach him in some of the same ways she approaches her deity in worship.

Everyone in the social segment has honour, with the oldest male head of the unit taking, formally, the function of the family ‘king’, the person with ostensibly the highest honour and ruling responsibility in the group. As the highest-ranking member of the micro-segment, the head represents it as he protects it. A slight to any member of the segment is perceived to dishonour all, but the head takes the lead formally in regaining lost honour and status. He also protects the honour of the group by enforcing adherence to a code for conduct, traditionally linked to its particular sub-caste and clan. The oldest male head has chief responsibility for punishing misbehaviour. Strictures on the movements of women are traditionally severe and it is the responsibility of men in the group to protect them. A man whose family members act inappropriately suffers humiliation and shame in part because of his presumed failure to rule effectively.

An insult from a member of the group signifies rebellion against the rule of the head. Despite outward shows of order, group relations, particularly among brothers and cousins, can be highly conflicted. The conflicts can involve disagreement over control of segment assets, but will often be expressed in terms of respect. There will be quarrels over appropriate shows of respect or the lack of respectful behaviour. In some contexts and situations, therefore, there will be competition for honour and authority in the group, depending on its size and constitution and on the personalities of members.

Most people growing up in a social segment will have their notions of social hierarchy and the nature of authority strongly informed by the values which lie behind the organisation of relationships in a family. Many people in India, particularly those who have little or no education and who have grown up at some distance from modern and western cultural influence, transfer to those in power notions of dominance and authority which they have experienced as members of segmented social units. Here authority is tied to persons who are thought to represent and protect the group. The head of the group is properly treated with shows of honour and respect which often seem overly elaborate to Europeans. Just by virtue of being the head, one has
honour, but one has to protect that honour from rivals. In this context honour does not mean main personal integrity so much as dominance and authority in a social or political domain.

Personal interaction in day-to-day affairs in India shows individuals in countless acts of deference and respect toward presumed superiors, using physical movement and language. Issues of honour are woven into the fabric of political intercourse on all levels. And here issues of the distribution of resources are not far behind. There is much evidence to suggest that headship of a political faction or other kind of domain is implicitly modelled on notions of lordship, in which notions of honour play an important role. In much of Indian life in the last half of the 20th century, the symbolic content of this lordship has been monarchical (Price, 1989). The person who plays what anthropologists called the royal function in a domain is the person to whom is shown, formally and/or informally, the highest honour. An anthropologist writing on political ideology in a village in West Bengal, Marvin Davis, noted:

Torkotala villagers…regard the king – whatever his actual varna [caste category] – as a kshatriya [warrior] and look upon him as the exemplary political figure… Each head of a [domain] replicates the function of a king, as it were, within a more limited realm…. Individuals and groupings of individuals at every level of social organization are thus seen as replicating royal functions, as being single or collective political actors, each concerned with the common aim of maintaining and upholding dharma [correct cosmic order] (Davis, 1983: 112–13).

At the core of kingly models for patronage is the conviction that daily well-being or relief from distress is dependent on discrete acts of mercy and generosity from superior beings, human or divine. Political possibilities are focused on what a figure of superior status and power can do to affect the well-being of others, either through largess and/or command of labour. Traditionally in Indian polity, the role of a ruler has been not to hoard wealth and centralise power so much as to determine their distribution (Heesterman, 1985: 138, 140). Historically, largess has played a major role in Indian polity in strategies for the achievement of high status. There is reason to believe that, to the extent that corruption involves redistributive micro-strategies, it needs to be viewed in this context.

If we take the example of Tamil polity as an example, vallanmai, charity or liberality in Tamil, has associations which go beyond the act
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of giving. Charitable and generous giving is associated with preserving, protecting and establishing. Dharma, in Tamil, refers to acting in accordance with and towards the support and protection of right order, and is often translated as liberality. A vallal, a man of outstanding charity and generosity, is also a tarumavan (from the word for dharma, tarumam). A Tamil word for king, puravalan, means a protector (coming from the pura, to protect), a defender and a liberal (generous) man. In monarchical cosmology, in appropriately allocating resources, the king acted in accordance with dharma, protecting the right order of things.9

The concept of dharma in connection with conventional actions is often associated with obedience to caste codes as the way a person plays his role in the maintenance of right order. Less attention has been paid to the notion of dharma as respect for the daily sphere and domain of a person as he fulfilled his dharma. In other words, built into the notion of dharma is the idea that every person has a right to his micro-domain of action, however low in status it may be. A patron in India exerts personal authority appropriately when he is generous because he is allowing his subordinates to build, protect and sustain their own personal domains. In politics this means allowing lesser politicians who are in one's faction the possibility of enhancing their own honour and developing their own possibilities for patronage, however limited this may be. From the point of view of actors in Indian politics, the distribution of spoils – along with the endless ‘fixing’ activities for constituents or would-be constituents – is part of the constitution of the (moral) authority of a politician. It would appear that superiors at different levels in bureaucratic administration in India feel, as well, that they have an informal obligation to allow their subordinates some room for the construction or maintenance of their personal domains. They may fear the consequences of instigating strong disciplinary measures, since these can be seen by their subordinates as a grossly inappropriate use of authority. This may be a reason why it has proved so difficult to wipe out corrupt practices in some sectors of the state and national bureaucracies.

In his famous book on the corruption of local-level bureaucrats in South India under colonial rule in the 19th century, Robert Frykenberg made ample use of the metaphor of white ants eating out the umbrella of state, pointing out that ‘[t]he white umbrella (with gold and scarlet trimming), a proud and lofty structure, is the traditional Indian symbol of Royal authority’ (Frykenberg, 1965: 231):

9. A running theme of Kingship and Political Practice (Price, 1996) is distribution of resources in strategies for ruling honour and status.
The white ant is a tiny creature of tremendous energy and silence which, by combining its efforts with countless other tiny brothers, can make a hollow shell or empty crust out of the stoutest wooden structure – as many a person has discovered to his sorrow upon sitting in a chair long left in some neglected dak (traveller’s) bungalow. The ant typifies what happens when energetic and silent local leadership, in combination, makes a hollow mockery out of the stoutest administrative structure.

What Frykenberg’s study of local colonial administration and my study of zamindari management suggest is that subordinates felt that they had the right to carve out their own micro-areas of lordship inside wider structures of rule. In return they honoured those rulers who permitted, wittingly or not, this domain construction. These case-studies from South India suggest that we can talk about monarchical cosmology in the 19th century in localities. The persistence of notions of honour, lordship and the personal distribution of resources in the 20th century speaks for the existence of contemporary cosmologies of social and political segmentation.

As I have indicated above, modern segmentary politics tends to be highly conflicted. Considering the relative instability of political relations in the informal structures of these polities, observers of Indian politics and administration may have to redefine their notions of professional, efficient practice. Administrative and political leadership consists very much of continuous, time-consuming activities of conflict management. In political parties in particular, the strategic distribution of cash plays an important role in attempts at party integration and coherence. Examining corruption in the context of systems of relationships and values leads to the conclusion that the best that Indian citizens – as well as their politicians and administrators – can expect for a long time to come is the management of corruption, not its eradication.

References

Debate


Summary


Some kinds of corruption in bureaucratic and political institutions in India are the function of systems of belief and practice which have historical antecedents. Corrupt actions are part of complex cultural dynamics involving contested notions about the ontology of ranks and statuses and the nature of authority. Based on research from South India, the author argues that political and social segmentary structures play major roles in influencing ordinary people’s notions about the nature of political domains and authoritative responsibility.