

# Corruption and a pro-active media

By N. Bhaskara Rao

Are we, as a nation, insensitive to corruption? For whatever reasons. The perception today is that the infection of corruption has pervaded all streams of public life. However, if one looks at the coverage of corruption in the media, one gets a different feeling.

Does it imply that media reporting of corruption has no influence on the civic conscious? Certainly something is missing in this present paradigm. Is it not?

Apart from individual level experiences, recent surveys at the macro-level have brought out the extent to which corruption has spread, not just at top levels and nationally, but affecting the common man in the availing of basic civic services. This is irrespective of the educational level or economic prosperity of both "givers" and "takers". That is, it is no longer bread-basket or illiteracy aspects that are responsible for corruption.

No wonder then that the space devoted to corruption and related coverage occupies about three per cent of daily newspapers against around one per cent more than two decades ago. Corruption-related coverage in media continues to be hyped and forgotten no sooner.

There are of course instances of media reports leading to collective civic action when it comes to a fraud "swami" and the likes. But seldom does one see a boycott of a corrupt politician. The point is that the citizen is more often passive and collection civic action is rare. "Collection media concern" to expose corruption is unheard of and "media crusade" is rare. "Judicial activism" and even "collective civic activism" cannot achieve the desired results. With "media activism" it should be possible.

Have we failed to put corruption on our agenda other than at election times? Poll-eve surveys of the Centre for Media Studies (CMS) over the years have shown that individually voters are concerned about corruption and the corrupt. The percentage of such voters, however, was invariably below 25 per cent — even in Tamil Nadu and Bihar.

In fact, it was hardly 15 per cent in most

States. Nevertheless, such a concern has not led to civic action or change in outlook. Actual voting preference hardly reflects any concern about corruption. But then that perhaps reminds us of the inherent limitation of our electoral system. Despite a "demographic shift" in voter composition, "TINA" continues to be a factor.

There is no "provocative" coverage of corruption in such a way as to make citizens do something about. Also, one does not find the media reporting of even isolated instances where a citizen or a community did something about rooting out corruption, so that more people could follow suit. Are our laws standing in the way of our media?

Then, of course, there is a more glaring contradiction regarding the priorities and the pre-occupation of our media. The kind of life-styles being projected, perpetuated and hyped, particularly on television, sustain corruption, partic-

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ularly among the middle and lower-middle class sections and even more in the minds of the young. In fact, media consumerism breeds greediness. That is, "self-centered" values and attitudes are being promoted by television channels.

Corruption involving a politician or a senior bureaucrat interests the media more than corruption going on systematically and affecting millions of common people. The ones which can be politicised are hyped and forgotten. For example, corruption in six cities and in six most-used public services hardly interested our media. *The Hindu* being an exception. Whereas the Tehelka revelations involving politicians remained on the front page headlines for days. I do not mean that the Tehelka expose should not have attracted such attention. They have done a commendable and courageous job. But, both the revelations should have.

The media more often ignores opportunities of bringing to the fore deep-rooted malice, con-

cerning most common citizens as it continues to rely on sensational angle.

This is yet another issue where I do not find much change over the decades. That is if one were to analyse the origin, source and content of our news media, one gets the impression that their priority is more with the Government, politicians, bureaucrats and businessmen, not so much for the citizens — not to the extent they deserve.

The country has been witnessing recently a series of financial frauds, manipulations and conspiracies affecting millions of common people. During the same period we have seen proliferation of news media, including 24-hour news channels and on-line news. Most operations (both in the news rooms and financial markets) are computerised and supposedly operating with lot more transparency than ever before.

And yet how often news media were able to expose "in-time" or before so that millions of investors are not deprived of their life savings as in the case of US-64? As readers, viewers or investors and citizens, are we more "enlightened" or "better informed" today so that we could escape or avoid such mishaps and market traps? And yet circulation of our newspapers has increased and even more so the viewership. How do we explain this phenomena?

Media hardly follows up its own stories. Nor does it go outside the purview or perspective of a "sponsor" or "interested" stakeholder. Let us take another example of nearly Rs. 40,000 crores or an amount of such magnitude being spent on rural development in the country. There has been so much research on rural development. And yet how much sustained and substantial coverage or expose do we see in the media? Such a way that it helps, enables and enlightens the concerned, particularly "the effectees"? Media, for sure, could bring in a lot more transparency in our public systems than any legislation can, including the one on Freedom of Information.

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