Corruption as Everyday Practice. The Public–Private Divide in Local Indian Society

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1. Introduction

Corruption has become *salon-fähig* in the development debates. The focus is mostly on countries in the developing world, which are perceived as being more corrupt, and in part this focus constitutes a new way of constructing a defining division of 'us' from 'them'. From a culturally sensitive point of view it can be argued that the focus on corruption as a 'problem' in the developing world prevents us from understanding that these are practices developed within a fully mature normative system of no less moral validity than any other normative system. Moreover, the focus on the corrupt act as an isolated object for study disregards the parallels in other social practices. The act of corruption seen in isolation then becomes difficult to understand. This is particularly actute because the definition of what constitutes a corrupt act is based on a particular body of ideas and values, whereas its practice is in many societies understood on the basis of a different and wider body of ideas. The fundamental starting point for this article is that in the wider context of social life, the simple act of corruption (for the moment understood as an illicit deal involving the holder of a public position) is only one among many outcomes of habitual practices. The corrupt act involves habitual networking, negotiation and manipulative application of ideas and moral arguments – it just happens to involve a holder of a public position.[1]

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1   An earlier version of this essay was circulated as SUM Working Paper 1998:4. It has been given at a seminar on 'Corruption and development' at Uppsala University in 1998 and at a workshop on Public Administration in the Developing World, at NIBR, Oslo. Insights and valuable comments have generously been offered by Therese Tjeldflaat, Kathinka Frøystad, Ketil Fred Hansen, Dan

Compared to widely used definitions of corruption, this approach shifts the vantage point from which we try to understand corruption to the level and places where corruption is practised. I focus on everyday forms, in backwater towns and rural societies, on the widespread petty corruption that involves ordinary people – villagers, lower level bureaucrats, petty businessmen and the local politicians. The material was collected during fieldwork in rural West Bengal, a state in eastern India. West Bengal is not particularly known for widespread corruption although some has come to light lately. The fact that corruption in West Bengal is not as endemic as, for instance, in neighbouring Bihar allows us a view of people's manoeuvring in a situation of 'ordinary' and 'medium-range' corruption rather than in an unusual and extreme case. Besides, there is a general awareness among ordinary villagers as well about the illegitimacy of bribe-taking, embezzlement, and favoritism. The second aim is that by switching the focus to the manner in which the common actor relates to such acts and to the moral background to these practices, we may gain new perspectives to the study of corruption.

2. The Common Definition of Corruption

In the main, corruption studies have been the domain of political scientists or economists (Price, 1999).[2] Anthropology and similar disciplines have not achieved the place in corruption studies that their potential insights and perspectives should warrant. Anthropological literature on corruption is scant and very case-study oriented, with little endeavour to arrive at generalisations.[3] There are possibly good reasons for this; ethnographic data on corruption are not easily available, and methods such as 'participant observation' are not applicable to this particular line of inquiry. Typically the present article is based on ethnographic data that mostly came my way in an incidental fashion. It is also possible that the communication gap has been too wide. The cultural sensitiveness, ethnographic minutiae or esoteric concerns of anthropology do not lend

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Banik, Pamela Price, Morten Løtveit, Harihar Bhattacharya, Razmik Panossian and two anonymous referees. All inconsistencies are mine.

2   The otherwise thorough overview of corruption issues in Rose-Ackerman (1999) is strikingly thin when it comes to corruption as a 'cultural problem'.

3   This is an oversimplification, but it is probably correct to state that anthropology has not been concerned with corruption as such, only with related topics such as networking, kinship, gifts, etc.

themselves easily to the policy-oriented requirements of donor-driven corruption research. Communication across disciplinary divisions, however, is best achieved when basic views are made clear.

Definitions of corruption abound. One often employed is the standard definition formulated by the World Bank which focuses on the abuse of public power for private benefit (or profit). Conventionally definitions centre on this distinction between the individual in his (or her) private capacity as a family member or greedy individual on the one hand, and, on the other, that same individual in his or her public capacity. The 'public' element of the different definitions may vary in the degree of emphasis on formal institution or on the state, some definitions may be more legalistic than others. There are other definitions too, but they are variations over a theme. Such definitions can easily be repudiated from a culturally sensitive reading of say African or Indian material. Although they may resonate with deep understandings concerning the role of individuals in the institutionalised state apparatus in the western world, such sentiments may not be readily shared in other societies. One of the few ethnography-based articles on corruption has argued precisely that from the participant's point of view this distinction is unclear, the division between state and society is 'blurred' (Gupta, 1995). Such state-centric definitions have a cultural bias tending to ignore the 'cultural embeddedness' of practices grouped under the term corruption. Particular social norms widely represented in modern Africa, for instance, 'communicate' with or influence the practices of corruption (Olivier de Sardan, 1999: 26). The practices of Indian politicians, which include a measure of corruption, may be properly understood as a development from precolonial forms of rulership (Price, 1999). The role of the politician is not unascribed but carries expectations that are culturally informed by the historic role of the king, for whom the distinction between public and private was irrelevant. In short, the very idea that corruption can be endemic, general and systemic without resonating with deep sentiments is unsustainable. When corruption is widespread, writes Samuel Paul, it reflects 'fundamental flaws … in the values and traditions of the people of that society' (Paul, 1997: 1350).

The definition of corruption becomes something of an ethnocentrism. Many different practices are grouped together under the same umbrella: bribery, graft, embezzlement, kickbacks, nepotism, favouritism, extortion, fraud, bending of rules, gifts and 'considerations', and 'commissions' – all grouped under a term which literally means

'decay'.[4] Although these many phenomena appear to have certain traits in common – the blurredness between the private and the public is one of them – they are still very dissimilar phenomena. They are dissimilar in terms of how they are conceived, how they are morally evaluated by the actors involved, and how they are culturally constructed. The moral basis varies widely for each of the different practices. Simply put, to use one's contacts to help an unfortunate nephew to get entry to a preferred school is not understood to be the same as charging a poor peasant money for handing him a form or embezzling money from a building construction. To term all such practices 'corruption' is to paint black what is in reality a variety of colours. This ethnocentric exercise condemns actions and the normative basis of those actions simply on the basis that they are dissimilar to our norms.[5] Most of these terms and phrases refer to actions that have separate moral justifications and entrenched normative bases. To help a nephew in need is to most people in the world a laudable thing to do. The notable exception to this rule is people exercising their office in formal institutions – precisely the focus of most definitions of corruption. However, this constitutes a breach in the application of an otherwise universally applicable moral standard – to help your kin. Legally based restrictions on family obligations are not unequivocally accepted in all cultures. Even where the legal restriction is well-known, the moral obligation may well be stronger. From the strong sense of family obligation follows a practice that incidentally conflicts with the needs of the modern state. Is that sufficient to term it 'decay'?

The aim here, though, is not to defend corruption as a practice. Nor do I wish to argue that the focus on corruption is futile or even harmful – although such arguments can be made with some validity. The aim is rather to investigate the practice of the distinction between private and public in a non-western society and equally the practice of crossing and straddling this dividing line. The first part will elaborate on the practice of corruption, in particular the formation and usage of networks, and the second part will seek to deduct some more general implications from the material. The material is centred on a few complex and multipronged examples. The basic thrust derives from situations that reveal how social prac-

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4   Certain types of corruption do not necessarily fall within the World Bank definition. Embezzlement, for instance, is legally a form of theft. However, in practice the distinction is unclear.

5   They also have unfortunate consequences for the efficiency of the modern state, but so do many other social practices in our society.

tices of networking are helpful in penetrating a recalcitrant state. Such practices are not only helpful as strategic tools that people employ, they are habitual practices (*habitus*) employed in any number of difficult situations, as routine strategies resorted to. In the discussion, the point will not be to underline the significance of the culture-sensitive point of view, but to explore the practice of the crossing in a situation where the awareness of its illegitimacy is widespread.

3. Networking

The practice of networking creates a pool of people that can be expected to be of use when issues arise in the lives of an individual: When searching for a bride for one's son an extended network is mobilised; when on the look-out for a reliable wholesale dealer for the harvest, inquiries are made to friends and relatives in similar circumstance; when desiring entry to a preferred school for a son or daughter, distant relatives may be solicited for information and contacts; when in need of assistance in dealing with a disagreement with the police, powerful contacts are approached, etc. Normal life represents any number of difficult situations that the individual alone cannot solve. He or she relies to a considerable extent on the social network for economic survival and protection. The network is of course also a matter of social standing, prestige and status, as well as, last but not least, a matter of personal satisfaction and comfort. It is somehow incidental that this widespread social practice also allows the individual to penetrate on occasion the formal and impersonal machinery of the state, whether this may be its bureaucracy or the political system. The difference here is that the difficult situation that requires solution happens to involve institutions of the state. The first example here, involving Uttam and his quest for a schoolteacher position, will illustrate how useful networking may turn out to be.

In spite of his university degree, Uttam found it difficult to get a position as a teacher in primary school. The number of vacancies is far less than the number of available well-educated candidates. After years of waiting and applying to individual schools he went to the Calcutta-based government employment exchange in order to have his name placed on lists of available candidates, lists that are sent to primary schools with vacancies. But the intimidating bureaucracy dismissed him with a host of rules and demands for certificates, and then (after weeks of back and forth) proceeded to place

him so far down the list that he would have the prospect of a job offer only after several years. Dispirited he lingered in the corridors, chatting with the other hopefuls there. He accidentally met someone who – during the obligatory chatting over tea in which Bengalis so eagerly engage – turned out to be the distant relative of someone Uttam knew from his university time. Uttam was an excellent 'networker'. He kept close tabs on a very large number of people, kept updated address lists, corresponded widely, and had a particular flair for names. He was also quite charming in his own way and was for instance invited to more weddings than most people.

This connection that Uttam could make to a fellow student several years back was sufficient for the chance acquaintance to divulge how he had found his way around the same intimidating bureaucracy; the right person to bribe, and the right way of approaching him. The acquaintance also went out of his way to arrange a meeting for the following week and helped negotiate the details of the transaction (standard sum, standard procedure). The meeting was successful and Uttam then got listed to several schools over the following months.

The problems that the individual actor faces when addressing government institutions are very often insurmountable, and so he is locked in a situation of permanent disadvantage. However, networking, establishing social relations and maintaining these, is a crucial coping strategy that Indians employ in dealing with and penetrating the formal and distant government machinery. Bengalis and other Indians spend hours chatting (*adda mara*), meeting friends or relatives at tea-stalls or under the shade of a tree.[6] They talk about current events, national and village politics, gossip about common acquaintances and discuss the practicalities relating to an enormous range of issues. They eagerly include the friend of a friend in their group of gossipers, and interrogate with gusto any stranger recently introduced about his or her background. This seemingly meaningless and tedious patter is an important and crucial social mechanism in which friendships – which are also contact points – are made. On these occasions, people map each other out, place one another on a social map of relations, which is hopefully completed with 'entries' on relations, contacts and background. Later on they can, if need be, draw on this knowledge to find contacts or information in different spheres of society. This wide net of acquaintances, friends, relatives and colleagues – in Bengali known as the *atmiya-swajan,*

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6 Chatting, gossiping, is a favorite Bengali pastime. Chakrabarty (1999).

one's kin and likes[7] – is actively and continuously expanded, maintained and exploited. A brother's class-mate, the in-laws of a newly married cousin, the friend of a friend, or the brother of a friend's friend – these are contacts that may be potentially very useful at a later point, yielding important information, furnishing further contacts, opening points for penetration of intimidating bureaucracies.

Generally in Bengali society, the special value attached to personal contact and personal relationships is particularly marked. On a practical level this allows for a wide resource basis of personal contacts for problem solving and often has clear economic benefits. The practice of a normative system that emphasises mutuality, obligations and the morality of kinship as basic to social being brought Uttam closer to information and access to state services. It still took him more than a year to land a teacher's job; still this was a strategy that came easy and naturally. Other strategies, that he was to pursue later on, included contacts in the dominant political party (a measure of political involvement) and building of direct relationships with personell at schools that had vacancies. On one occasion he brought the visiting anthropologist to the school as an excuse to gain access. That other strategies were more useful as well as legitimate underlines and perhaps emphasises how useful networking can be in such situations and how easily it can lead to situations where bribe-giving is contemplated as the next act. The dynamic of the situation was in itself not different from similar situations where information was sought. His huge network was not maintained with state penetration foremost in mind, but it allowed him, incidentally and when the occasion arose, to do that too.

Particular contacts and general networks may be maintained and cultivated with a strategic consideration also. Kondos (1987) shows this in a case from Nepal, and networking can be seen as the backbone of political engagement in India – whether locally or at a higher level. Even to a non-political individual, certain contacts more than others are maintained for their potential usefulness. However, it is crucial to understand that in cases where the invisible border between private and public, between the acceptable and the more dubious, is about to be crossed, it is often with a bit of reluctance, with some hesitation, with an eye to other possibilities. When actually crossed, the act is very often shrouded in the atoning idiom of reciprocity.

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7   For an investigation see Inden and Nicholas (1977).

4. Reciprocity and Bribes

The case of Kalo will illustrate the practice of active use of one's network, a case where the network is pushed and employed widely with a clear strategic goal. The case will also illustrate how the traits of ability and cunning enter into the picture, and how this game of 'personal contacts' somehow reluctantly comes to involve an exchange of money. Kalo was a technician of sorts, a hard-working man, who for various reasons had given up his paid job to start living off the land that he owned. The expanse of land was not very small and he, his wife and their two children could live the lives of a middle-class peasant household. But they also had (urban) middle-class aspirations, in particular for their children for whom they wanted to secure a good – which means costly – education. In order to secure a more steady income, Kalo applied for a position as a Class IV employee at the local hospital. There were 30 vacant positions, and several hundred applicants. The interviews were held over several days. Kalo had reasonably good qualifications, but so had many others. Educated unemployment is one of the scourges of West Bengal. As one who was not exceptionally qualified, he knew that only informal sources of influence would help. Over the month or so that went by from the formal interviews to the declaration of the results, Kalo – who was a close friend of mine – came to spend the night at our apartment in town on four occasions, and on at least seven occasions came by for lunch or afternoon tea. The reason for these frequent travels into town from his village home was searching for information and contacts that would secure a positive handling of his application.

In the end I could not follow the intricacies of his often frenetic search, but at least in the beginning it went something like this: He had initially two promising contacts, the first being an old friend of his who was employed in the municipality and who allegedly knew personally one of those in charge of the selection process. Accompanied by this friend, Kalo went to the person in charge of the selection process, who, however, turned out to be quite unwilling to be approached in the matter. He declared himself opposed to favouritism and dismissed them.

The second promising contact was his cousin, whose neighbour was a highly placed hospital clerk. In the company of his cousin, Kalo visited this clerk one evening, and the clerk kindly promised to do his bit to help. He warned them, however, that this would involve money because he would need to make payments to certain well-placed people. Kalo expected him to take a reasonable cut for him-

self as well. Some days later, having talked to the people in question, the clerk informed Kalo of the sum that was required. This was a rather steep sum (some thirty thousand rupees), but the argument was that many palms would have to be greased and anyhow many other applicants had already been paying out in order to secure themselves a position. Kalo gave up pursuing this line because of the amount involved. The price demanded was prohibitive, so other strategies were called for. When bribing is not an alternative, other strategies are needed. And Kalo used his energies to pursue these.

The friend with whom Kalo had visited the person in charge of the selection process, was possibly a little humiliated by his own inadequate knowledge about the man's views. The status attached to a good network of contacts in high places often leads people to exaggerate the quality of their relationships. His friend subsequently gave Kalo the name of another person to approach. This person, he explained, was extremely well-connected in the municipality and could arrange almost everything. This man worked out of town, but returned each evening to Burdwan by train. Kalo met him twice, by the bicycle-stand next to the railway station, and on both occasions late at night. Their conversations, once over tea and once walking the street with their bicycles, centred on price, contacts and possible return favours from Kalo. Kalo's brother-in-law (Nikhil, to whom I shall return shortly) was a Calcutta-based journalist with a wide network and one or two exceedingly highly placed friends. It was this connection, in addition to the money, that this man seemed to be wanting to take advantage of, for future use. He wanted Kalo to introduce him to Nikhil. Kalo hesitated about involving his brother-in-law, possibly because he thought his own influence with Nikhil was limited. In between their two meetings, Kalo made his own inquiries about this man through some other contact that he had in the municipality. These contacts again suggested that the man was not entirely to be relied upon, and that he might well be unable to secure the job for Kalo in spite of everything offered.

In the meantime, it had turned out that the in-laws of Kalo's cousin were close personal friends of one of the town commissioners.[8] After some ado, Kalo was accompanied by his cousin to meet the commissioner (or was he an ex-commissioner? no one seemed to

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8   Commissioners are elected representatives to the municipality. Their clout in city matters lies not so much in their position as commissioners as in their position in the dominant political party. Not all commissioners are well-connected and powerful; some are very marginal.

know or care). The commissioner listened carefully but explained that his own position was not one of great influence in the matter (which may have been to say that he was not particularly interested). He promised to write a letter to the right person recommending Kalo. Evidently he did not wish to jeopardise his relationship with his friends, whose son-in-law had brought this person. Yet to all present this meant that he would not apply his clout in this matter. Kalo's cousin suggested that it would be quicker and less burdensome for the commissioner to just pick up the phone and call the right person. But the commissioner insisted that in these matters it was important to follow the correct procedures, otherwise things could become misconstrued.

Kalo's adventures over the last two of the four weeks eluded me since we were out of town. The last strategy that I know of was that he implored his brother-in-law, Nikhil, to come to his assistance. Nikhil, who lived in Calcutta, was the well-connected journalist with contacts high up in the party hierarchy. Kalo phoned Nikhil, explained the situation to him, and told him to go see his exceedingly highly placed contact and personal friend. Such an influential person would only have to pick up the phone and tell the man in charge of the selection committee that this Mr so-and-so is a very reliable man and you may want to consider him closely – and the man would be employed. Highly placed individuals do not give orders in such matters, they just hint. The muted code is that if the official in question does as hinted, the highly placed individual will remember his name at some later point.

However, at this point a different concern entered into our story. In a highly corrupt society there is no reason why such a chain of events would not be set in motion. But corruption of this kind – patronism, nepotism, or whatever it is called – is illegitimate to most actors, at least in West Bengal. Different ideological considerations overrule the use of contacts. Nikhil was a journalist in a communist paper, and the ruling Communist Party, to which he belonged, prided itself in being incorrupt. The idea of providing a clean and clearly pro-poor government was a strong ideological guideline for many members of the Communist Party. Kalo knew this, and he knew Nikhil's stand (which is probably why he had hesitated about involving Nikhil), but was growing increasingly desperate. Nikhil, however, was reluctant, promised once or twice that he would, but eventually did not. Twice Kalo went all the way to Calcutta (a full day's project) to meet him, but Nikhil fled his home rather than face him. For Nikhil – when I spoke with him later – it was too embar-

rassing to ask this very senior politician to do such a petty thing as securing a relative a Class IV position.[9] It was simply too humiliating to have to ask. Nikhil's dilemma shows us that different considerations apply to such cases. His opposition to nepotism was mellowed by family obligations. However, his moral dilemma in the end led him to refuse to interfere on his brother-in-law's behalf. He declined to do it, declined to help his sister's family, and jeopardised his relationship with her, his favourite sister. They were not on speaking terms for a long time. The logic of reciprocity and obligations creates pressures on the individual official – including the honest ones, who have to make sacrifices in order to stand their ground.

Kalo's other strategies failed and he did not get the job. But his case is still interesting as an example of how the habitual practice of networking operates and may help penetrate the state. Networking is explicitly employed as a strategy to cope with the bureaucracy. Kalo's working the net was an unsuccessful attempt but an attempt none the less. (With 30 positions and several hundred applicants, most attempts would have to be unsuccessful.) Bribing was a possible strategy, but only one among several, and not a very reliable strategy. And even where the issue of a bribe did appear, it was invariably in the light disguise of kinship relations, wrapped in the morality of the widespread net of friends and relatives and relatives' friends – the *atmiya-swajan*. Kalo worked this system, with its innumerable points of contact, its morality of mutual obligations, and with its various paths and severalty of strategies. Perhaps he just lingered too long, vacillating between options. Perhaps he was just not a good player, or did not have much to offer in return. In any event his story shows the painstaking search for possible points for penetration of someone who had become engaged with the bureaucracy, a search which involved multipronged strategies, where an appreciation of the importance of building personal relationships is a must – even where an exchange of money takes place – and where finesse and understanding of hidden meanings are required tools of trade. Kalo was engaged in difficult and subtle negotiations; aiming to be successful he employed his skills in persuasion and he exploited his network. Fundamentally, his case shows the unclear or plastic distinctions between 'public' and 'private'. The following pages will seek to use this ethnography in order to extract a more refined understanding of the practice of corruption.

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9   For those not familiar with the Indian administrative system, this is pretty far down in the hierarchy, albeit not at the bottom.

5. The Puzzle of Inconsistent Condemnation

It can plausibly be argued that the state as it appears locally in the eyes of its citizens is coloured by the circumstance of corruption as one of the means of mediation between the state and individuals. Moreover, studies show that corruption is condemned by a majority of the population in most third world countries (Rose-Ackerman, 1999: 91). My own experience from India supports this impression. Newspapers are commonly very critical of the political establishment and regularly publish articles on alleged corruption. In private people are even more critical. Corruption is universally condemned as bad and I have personally not come across anyone who would be willing to defend corruption – that is, even from the native's culturally sensitive point of view. At the same time though, a great many people will participate in acts that can be labelled 'corrupt', and that too with ease and dexterity – viz. the above examples with the exception of Nikhil. This then is one of the puzzles of trying to understand corruption.

The very vocal opposition against corrupt activities may seem to contradict my arguments early in this article, but not necessarily.[10] Ideas do move on different levels of consciousness and application. A voiced general opposition does not preclude exemptions for particular situations. Nikhil the journalist's hesitation is a case in point. A moral universe is rarely unitary or even allows for only one answer to difficult situations. Again we should keep in mind the basic plasticity of discourses and arguments, and also that the nuances of interpretation applied by different parties to an act are not static.

Bribe-taking, rule-bending and favouritism were universally condemned as morally base and unacceptable by all my friends and informants. The understanding of the causes of widespread corruption in their society, however, was somewhat defeatist. Attitudes would be expressed in phrases such as 'Indians are inherently corrupt'; 'The bureaucracy was not corrupt under the British but now it is manned by Indians', or 'We Indians, we always elect the wrong [meaning corrupt] leaders'.[11] Politicians and bureaucrats were in-

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10 From Africa Olivier de Sardan points out similar contrasts. He explains the gap by pointing out an absence of 'ethic of public service', the lack of a 'public domain' tradition, and the strong sentiment of shame that prevents people from blowing the whistle. The social price of conflict is simply too high. Olivier de Sardan (1999: 30–31).

11 The first is not a direct quote but a paraphrasing of several statements. The two latter are direct quotes. The first was made by a bureaucrat and the second by a businessman. All, however, mimic widespread sentiments. although, with reference to the second of the three statements, some would also hold that corruption was brought to India by the British.

variably talked about in negative terms (Ruud, forthcoming). The state machinery as such was considered corrupt and corrupting, and popular attitudes to the state were mostly negative because of that. Terms employed to describe corruption suggest how shady and unsavoury such activities were viewed: *ghush* (in Bengali, meaning 'bribe'), from what is low, suppressed, secret (Dev, 1989); and *bhrastachar* (in Hindi, meaning 'corruption'), from *bhrasta* – 'fallen, depraved, spoilt' (Das Gupta, 1977). These are common terms applied to situations where there is illicit transgression of official roles.

In the case of Bengali villagers, outright bribery is held distinct from other forms of corruption, such as forms of nepotism. The term used for bribes (*ghush*) does not cover forms such as nepotism. Other expressions are used in connection with kickbacks and embezzlement (e.g. *taka khaoya*, or 'eating money'). As such, bribes appear to have a special significance, a specially negative meaning. For one thing, there is the power gap in many situations that enables the bureaucrat to demand a sum fixed by himself from the pleading poor peasant. The poor peasant has often a very limited option but to pay, and to pay the rate more or less dictated to him. This situation is very different from what we associate with nepotism, namely the morally more or less enforced bending of (administrative) rules for the sake of family.

Bribery may then be held to be morally different from nepotism. The intent behind the move is important to its legitimacy. However, I would argue that outright bribery is not a distinct type of activity for our purposes. Consider this: A villager has to pay a bribe to a government service in order to get a service done. He will call it 'a bribe' (*ghush*), and he will probably be quite frustrated about it. But his neighbour may well manage to get the same service done without having to pay for it. Instead he would have used his contacts, sources of influence, channels of contact-generation, or his powers of persuasion, manners, references to caste or community. This last act will be termed and interpreted differently, yet the crossing of the public–private dividing line will have been the same.

Perhaps the blurredness or softness of the public–private division does not stem just from poorly understood categorisations but from the fluidity of interpretations of an act of crossing. The rationale behind the crossing and the manner in which the dividing line is crossed constitute crucial elements in how such an act is legitimised and accepted (or not). One clue to the lack of general opposition to corruption is possibly found here, in that there are ways and means

by which the ordinary villager circumvents the obstacles posed by an impersonal bureaucracy. Even when not demanding bribes but instead following rules and regulations, a state official may still create problems for individual villagers, problems that he will seek to overcome one way or the other. It is not the poor as such who pay the bribes, it is those without adequate contacts (albeit the poor are mostly disadvantaged in terms of what they have to offer in a relationship – poor and low-quality contacts constitute a marginal 'capital basis' with which to extend networks). What they do is they 'manage', or *myanej kara*, an English term used in Bengali to denote the sort of wheeling-dealing activity that sorts out problems through use of a wide range of contacts and different means of persuasion. 'Fixing' seems an adequate translation. The clever 'fixer' is applauded among his peers. He plays a potentially crucial role in their lives, as a middleman who furnishes contacts and expedites deals. To outwit the bureaucracy suggests cunningness and ability, qualities that are sought after. Such a person cultivates contacts with friends, to whom he may again be useful, whom he may help, and who in turn may be useful to him. Other players may be less clever, and there are degrees in the level of activity that people exercise. However, as the case of Kalo would indicate, even the not-so-successful players know the basic rules and practices of the game.

6. Between Bribes and Obligations

Kalo's endeavours demonstrate that the distinguishing line between a bribe and a friend's friend's influence can be wafer-thin and often overlaps. In his case a bribe was only the last resort, a blunt and unsafe tool contemplated where other means proved inadequate. A bribe is but one way of persuading recalcitrant bureaucrats to do their job or do it differently. Only in the most difficult of circumstances does one pay a bribe; in most cases any ordinary and reasonably well-informed villager will seek out other possibilities first. People do not primarily seek to achieve objectives *vis-à-vis* the state through the use of money or other types of 'grease'. They work the system – middlemen, contacts, friends, relatives – seeking energetically to avoid paying a bribe but in the process trying to achieve the same objective through other means of persuasion or influence. 'Non-bribe influence' will, when successful, still be a form of corruption, but it will appear to many as a less stark and more acceptable form. In many instances, it is likely that influence is a preferred method of persuasion, not only as compared to brib-

ery but also instead of a long and complicated legal process – perhaps involving costly fees.

Moreover, in actual practice the distinction between a bribe and using one's contact is not clear. It is not easy to draw the distinction between paying up, in cash, and repaying later, in the currency of return favours. Between the two extremes of paying a bribe and doing favours for your next of kin lies a spectrum of different types of interactions, with shades of meaning and intention. Transactions will be open to interpretation, and interpretation is important because it is about what legitimises the act. This of course also opens to contestation and differing opinions. The meaning of paying money for a service is not necessarily imbued with the stark notion of a pure monetary transaction. A certain mutual understanding has to be reached, and the money is paid on the understanding that other hands will have to be greased, sometimes perhaps as a 'consideration', or in view of expenses that may be incurred or inconveniences or risks experienced while doing the favour. But the reciprocation for inconveniences or risks may well be done in other currencies, in return favours, delayed and of a completely different order.

7. Strategic Relationships

We may consider the distinction as a continuum of shades, from gestures of thanks to unashamed bribes. At one end of the scale, next to gestures of thanks, one would find the symbolic gift of thanks, a cigarette, some food item, or a courtesy visit. Next there would be the gifts of reciprocity, that cement the relationship rather than end it. Such gifts may range from token to substantial, and the exact nature of the gift and return gift may be negotiated. It depends much on the nature of the relationship, the stakes involved, and the relative status of the parties involved. Moving along the continuum one might find the gifts that honour, that add to the status of the receiver as a man of substance fit to be given fine gifts, thus defining his superior status. Such gifts also range from token to substantial. Here a smaller or larger element of strategy may be involved, from vying for favours to buying favours.

At the far end of the continuum, just before bribes, we find return favours explicitly for services rendered. In one of the few culturological studies of corruption in South Asia, Alex Kondos narrates a story from Nepal about how a relationship to someone of importance can be created, intentionally and strategically, yet it has to be a personal relationship which cannot be pressed for un-

called-for benefits (Kondos, 1987). This takes place within an accepted cultural frame. Through certain symbolic acts and much time spent, an individual may enter into the circle of clients/friends of a major figure in a culturally meaningful way. The relationship is one of reciprocity, yet has a strategic element and allows the individual to penetrate the maze of government rules and role sharing. But the interested nature of the relationship is by necessity on a morally sustainable basis.[12] This seems to be a rather unusual case, although active establishment and maintenance of relationships are known and commonly practised. For one thing it is necessary to acknowledge that some people are better players than others – they have more charisma, are more intelligent and charming and have less of a problem in establishing relationships. Whether or not the relationship is pursued with a strategic motive is not easily decided. Moreover, the personal bond is the one that legitimises the relationship and any transactions within. Fictitious kinship is constituted not only by a liberal use of kinship terms but by an active personal interest in each other's personal lives. The personal aspect of the relationship will always be seen to be strong, even where, to both parties, the relationship is clearly strategic. The motive behind an exchange of gifts (or services) becomes crucial then. The more outrageous forms of corruption, such as outright bribing among strangers, are illegitimate in an Indian or Bengali context, whereas kind reciprocities among close friends or relatives are not. However, the defining line between friends and strangers is not clear-cut. We need to look closer at how the practice of corruption is constructed and rationalised, how the exchange of money somehow incidentally enters into the process.

The moral imperative to provide immediate and unselfconscious support for members of one's extended family is a well-known feature of South Asian society, valid naturally for ordinary people as well as members of the political system and bureaucrats. Interestingly, the concept of the 'extended family' may also encompass individuals who are not family, in a strict or even rather loose sense. A term such as the Bengali *atmiya-swajan* spans widely to encom-

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12 Bourdieu (1977:181) refers to the dominant's position but the same could be said from the other vantage point also: 'Wastage of money, energy, time and ingenuity is the very essence of the social alchemy through which an interested relationship is transmuted into a disinterested, gratuitous relationship [...]'. Olivier de Sardan, on the other hand, talks of 'predatory authority' (1999). The ambivalent position of someone at the client end of a close patron–client relationship is touched upon in Ruud (forthcoming).

pass friends, neighbours with whom one is on good terms, long-term subordinates (labourers, servants), and even occasionally people rather distant in terms of status but with whom a close relationship is actively maintained. The morality of the extended family is thought to include and encompass also people with whom one has a strategic relationship. Such a relationship still builds on certain cultural presumptions that mitigate and hide its rawness. We could see that construct at work in the situation of Kalo visiting the commissioner – who was Kalo's cousin's in-laws' friend. This rather thin connection was enough to get Kalo an encounter with the commissioner and an opportunity to present his case before him. It was not enough to get the commissioner sufficiently interested, but then the connection was stretched rather thin. Had their relationship been closer his attitude might have been more forthcoming. Possibly, when a relationship is rather stretched in terms of intimacy, the need for favours to be compensated for soon is increased. The moral obligation of reciprocity is not strong when the other person is the cousin of one's friends' son-in-law.

8. The Performative Aspect

A tendency to regard an act of corruption as an 'exchange' in an economic sense (even if involving types of capital such as social or symbolic capital) conceals an important aspect. In seeking to understand the negotiation, we give due consideration to the moral environment in which the act is negotiated, to the cultural constitution of the 'items' involved, and to the limits set by access to information. Yet, the tendency is often to regard the act as something exchanged for something else, where a 'price' is fixed relative to the individuals involved and the service rendered. Such a view, however, ignores the 'performative aspect' of the negotiation, the deft (or not) handling of the process itself. There may, for instance, be a certain 'tempo' to the process, hidden codes and a muted language that constitute the negotiation process. These are elements subject to interpretation and manipulation. The 'real' message may well be the opposite of what is being voiced, but to know and be able to use these is a matter of competence and intelligence. Each and every 'player' may not be equally competent in this, it is an unevenly distributed form of 'capital'.

Knowing how to pay, or how not to pay, a bribe, or to get a bribe, or otherwise to circumvent rules and regulations, are feats that have their own heroism attached, a game with its own rules and heroes.

Although it has been held that corruption at today's level is something relatively new to India, caused by the British, or by overdone centralisation of decision-making after Independence ('the Licence raj'), or by the logic of democracy in an undemocratic society, or by liberalisation of the economy,[13] it can also be held that a notion of a public–private distinction is quite old. Equally it can be held that the problem of transgression of the public–private distinction is old. The problems of corruption are described in the *Arthashastra* (approx. 200 BC)[14] and in historical studies of eighteenth or nineteenth century British rule.[15] Whatever reasons for high or increased levels of corruption, we may suggest as not entirely implausible that crafty interaction with the state machinery has a long lineage in the history of Indian society. The fact that the state's capacity to enforce its own view of things was also relatively limited has probably contributed to the development of informal procedures of interaction between lower level officials and members of the population. The state has been there for a long time, and people have learnt to live with its potentially oppressive presence yet seek its limited but valuable resources. Put differently, through the state's constant presence in a society's daily existence, a mode of accommodation has been worked out and has – over time – given rise to certain informal yet somehow standardised procedures. We can understand corruption as part of a broader pattern of interaction between bureaucracy or state and the population in general, constructed as and evolved into a partly separate sphere of activity, a sphere with its own rules, codes of conduct, rewards and measures of success or failure. Let me try to describe it.

The process of negotiation for getting a job done by a bureaucrat – including the negotiation for the size of the possible bribe – is to many a type of game, and it requires knowledge, wit and intelligence. First of all, these matters are delicate, and have to be approached with a certain finesse. The main problem is mostly that one may not even know where to put the bribe, whom to approach, or how to breach the issue. It is extremely foolish to walk up to an

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13 The different arguments have been carried by respectively Paul (1997), Kaviraj (1994), Saberwal (1996), and Harriss-White and White (1996).

14 See in particular paragraph 2.9.34 (Rangarajan, 1992:283).

15 See, for instance, Frykenberg (1965). The establishment of an Indian Civil Service was an effort to shield the administration from other than official interaction with the population. Britain of course had its own forms of corruption in those days. The wheeling-dealing that went on with glee under the noses of the incorruptible ICS officers is shown in Chatterji (1981).

official and propose a bribe. He would in all likelihood take great offence, and in the presence of colleagues (many officials approachable by the public sit in the presence of colleagues) to accept a bribe would in most cases be unthinkable. To be able to master this game is certainly a matter of knowledge, experience and contacts. Even where a contact has been established, the issue of a bribe needs to be breached, the amount negotiated. To be capable of ably playing that game also enhances one's standing among one's peers, just as being manipulated by a more able player is a source of great embarrassment. In Akhil Gupta's 1995 narrative from a North Indian land record office, two young men were easy prey to the bemused manipulations of the record keeper. It was the two young men's complete lack of understanding of the game which left them entirely at sea – not their structural position. Gupta – whose phrase I have borrowed – talks about a 'performative aspect' of corruption, and writes that 'The "practice" of bribe giving [is not] simply an economic transaction, but a cultural practice that required a great degree of performative competence. [When complaining about corruption, villagers were also] expressing frustration because they lacked the cultural capital required to negotiate deftly for those services' (Gupta, 1995: 381). We may note in particular the playfulness with which the land record keeper treats the two inexperienced visitors.

Moreover, to be able to know where to grease, to push the right button, to know whom to talk to, these are eloquent measures of a man's political competence, his ability of knowing his way about. It is not knowledge that comes easy. It is an acquired skill based on intelligence, experience and learning, and a special kind of talent, or at least some finesse and knowledge of the rules of the game. The essence of the bribe negotiation is not only to arrive at a mutually agreed sum. It is a process in which the two parties try out each other's negotiation skills, cunningness and relative power and status. And it is a matter of getting the stakes lowered or increased. The hard negotiation over the size of the bribe will most often be rather understated, muted in coded messages and recognisable patterns of argumentation, which skill and knowledge alone can decode. The subtleties of the process are constituted in known or at least knowable procedures. This comes out in Wade's description of villagers in South India approaching irrigation department officers to negotiate for the timely release of irrigation water.

> The interaction between farmers and officers commonly goes
> something like this: a few farmers representing one village [...]
> will approach the AE [Assistant Engineer] in charge of the Sub-
> division in which their land is located, and put to him a request.
> The AE tells them, *as they expect*, 'No, I cannot agree. You
> please see Supervisor and see what he can do'. The AE, now
> informed, tells the Supervisor his price for giving them what
> they want. The Supervisor in turn tells the farmers how much it
> will cost them, perhaps with *an initial show of reluctance*. If
> the farmers do not agree some bargaining may follow, with the
> Supervisor sending them away with *a coded refusal* meaning
> that they should see him again after he has consulted with the
> AE. [...] (Note that the AE takes care never to be seen asking
> money of farmers) (Wade, 1982: 296, italics added).

Wade here gives us the description of a negotiation process which
is muted and coded, unstated yet somehow very real; it takes ex-
perience to understand and take part in it. It could be envisioned as
a system of flexible rules, performed ad hoc, guiding citizens in
their interaction with representatives of governmental services.

Bribery may be a specific type of activity, a monetary exchange
for particular, distinct types of known services. But in most cases
bribery is the last resort for those with no other means of persua-
sion. As an outright monetary exchange – a buying of a service –
it constitutes a defeat on the buyer of the service, the proof of his
inadequate contacts in the system, his inability to play the game that
matters, where the greatest asset is to have contacts or contacts
who have contacts. Most people go to great lengths in order to avoid
having to pay a bribe.

9. Peer Applause

The 'performative aspect' has a twin in the peer applause of the
able player. To be a good performer, able to make good deals, is a
matter of no small pride or praise. In the context of West Bengal,
civil or public servants who amass conspicuous wealth will be con-
demned by all but their nearest kin. And yet the able villager who is
cunning enough to get things done without paying a bribe or other-
wise outwitting someone in the state bureaucracy will be applauded
and praised by his circle of friends and most other people who
might happen to hear of it. To take a bribe is considered bad, and to
be forced to pay one is a pain. To be able to get something done

through a reliable contact in the bureaucracy, however, is praise-worthy and a good sign of being clever. This adds to the 'puzzle of inconsistent condemnation' we encountered above and shows that at least to some extent alternative motives may be at play.

Corruption, it can be argued, can be understood as a set of actions with some commonality, a certain behavioural characteristic, including perhaps the secrecy and often glee with which stories of these shady activities are told and retold between friends. What is corruption and what is not, is a matter of shade, where morality in an almost imperceptible way becomes daring immorality. It is a matter of contestation – not only between the haves and the have-nots, but between the high ground of ideological and moral purity and the daily quest for survival and pursuit of narrow, private interest – and it follows certain patterns, patterns that are improvised upon, but patterns none the less, certain standard procedures that enable people to penetrate what was supposed to be an impersonal state. In a way it resembles what Michel de Certeau in his study on the practice of everyday life calls 'poaching'. In describing how people use an imposed system, he writes:

> People have to make do with what they have. In these combatants' stratagems, there is a certain art of placing one's blows, a pleasure in getting around the rules of a constraining space. We see the tactical and joyful dexterity of the mastery of a technique. [...T]here is a skill that has its connoisseurs and its aesthetics exercised in any labyrinth of powers, a skill ceaselessly recreating opacities and ambiguities – spaces of darkness and trickery – in the universe of technocratic transparency, a skill that disappears into them and reappears again, taking no responsibility for the administration as a totality (de Certeau, 1984: 18).

10. End Notes

This article has suggested that the division between public and private – the basis for common definitions of corruption – does not carry the same moral weight in all societies. This does not mean that the division is unfamiliar or entirely alien. It is well known at least in a society such as the one I have drawn my case-studies from, but the application of the distinction in individual situations may be restricted by other more weightier moral considerations. When the dividing line is crossed – which would constitute an act of corruption – certain traits may be observed. In many cases indi-

viduals are drawn into situations in which the division is crossed in an incidental manner, by employing their network as they would to solve most other predicaments. When this does take place the distinction between different forms of corruption is not clear in practice. The different forms overlap, they have their own vocabularies, and the moral legitimation is open to contestation and manipulation. Not the least, the 'bribe' that is offered in return for a service may be an ill-defined future obligation. This is important, particularly since people often spend much energy seeking and trying out alternatives to a bribe, although the end-result may constitute the same act of corruption. The competent player who achieves without paying is applauded by his peers and I have argued that corruption has crucial 'performative aspects' with its own procedures and rewards – an 'art'.

De Certeau may be criticised for overstating the delight felt in the encounter with the machinery and drudgery of the dominant force. The delight stems only from overcoming what is an imposing and powerful system – like poaching is a delight only if not hunted down by the guards and the hounds from the manor. It is also important to note that he ignores how this 'art' and its appreciation may change with wider ideological changes in society. The performative aspect mentioned above is interesting because it allows for a view of the practice of negotiation – and of corruption – as non-static. Different elements may be brought into the negotiations, such as elements of law or morality, about, for instance, what top politicians are 'known' to be doing or have been exposed as doing. At a certain level, discourses and ideologies have an element of plasticity that allows for new ideas and evaluations to be brought in. The sense of a border between public and private is subject to the same currents of ideas and may be manipulated or influenced by events or renewed emphasis on moral interpretations. These procedures follow gently from other established procedures, the patterns of obligations, mutuality and expectations that are integral to every other aspect of daily life. These procedures are replicated in a natural fashion both in the search for a suitable marriage partner for one's daughter and in the search for information, contacts and assistance. Only with reluctance do these procedures shade off into the murky waters where money is exchanged and private interest quests become blaringly evident. But those instances are sought hidden, couched in words of double meaning – if you know how to read them – in hints that allow for salvaging one's honour. Corruption, in its many forms, is tricky to understand even for the practi-

tioner, because it is rarely purely wrong; it is a special case of a wider practice – mutuality and dependence – which allows it to remain ambiguous.

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