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Perhaps the simplest measure of a problem being endemic is when something that should be treated as a national outrage ceases to be newsworthy. The last four years of the UPA Government have thrown up several big-ticket corruption scandals: From the 2G scam to the Commonwealth Games scam, from corruption in coal block allocations to kickbacks for a seat on the Railway Board. But petty day-to-day bribery for public services that are our birthright is so all-pervading that it no longer surprises us. The Rs 200 paid for jumping a red light, the Rs 1,500 shelled out for a passport, the Rs 5,000 given to "expedite" a death certificate, and the Rs 25,000 with which the palm of a local tax official is greased are so commonplace that these have now become par for the course. We simply shrug our shoulders and move on.

News reports this week from different parts of the world should serve as an eye-opener. On July 8, China's former railway minister Liu Zhijun was handed a suspended death sentence for charges of graft, which included taking bribes of more than \$10 million to help 11 people secure government contracts and promotions. On July 9, the Global Corruption Barometer 2013 study, released by the Berlin-based watchdog Transparency International, said 54 per cent Indians admitted to having paid a bribe for at least one public service in the past year. The only countries worse than India were Yemen, Cambodia and 10 African nations in a list in which Sierra Leone was in last place. The only moderately positive figure in the study was that 41 per cent to 60 per cent of Indians still believe ordinary people can make a difference in the fight against corruption.

Our cover story, written by Deputy Editor Damayanti Datta, breaks down this problem of rampant petty bribery in our country, which, when the numbers are added up, comes to a staggering Rs 6.29 lakh crore paid in bribes by urban India every year. This works out to 6.3 per cent of the GDP. The forum I Paid A Bribe, run by the Bangalore think tank Janaagraha Centre for Citizenship and Democracy, has alone recorded a whopping Rs 186.6 crore paid in bribes by 23,000 Indians over a period of three years.

Loss to the national exchequer of such scale causes untold damage to the economy. The World Bank ranks bribery as one of the biggest barriers to a country's growth, bringing it down by 0.5 to 10 percentage points per year, depending on how rampant it is. At the root of the problem is the lack of rigorous enforcement which results in the bribe-taker having no fear of being brought to book. Plus lack of transparency in the application of rules and regulations, giving public servants the room to favour those who are willing to pay up.

Some experts argue that a way out would be to ensure that state agents are not underpaid, not overworked, and better monitored. Some others say that there must be immunity from law to bribe-givers in the case of harassment bribes, thereby giving them an incentive to expose bribe-seekers. But more than anything, petty bribery can be rooted out through a movement of common citizens who have the courage and conviction to say “no” and to expose the corrupt.

However, I believe corruption will only end or diminish if the leadership of government in all its various institutions shows zero tolerance for it. With rising public awareness and aggression on this issue there's hope in the air that leaders will pay heed to it in their own interest.



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(Aroon Purie)