



Religions and Development Research Programme

Religions, ethics and attitudes towards corruption: a study of perspectives in India

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In countries where religion plays a central role in people's lives, it is expected that many people, including public servants, will derive their moral and ethical values from their religion. Religion provides many with a language of ethics and, often, an actual 'list' of rules by which to live, some of which may be relevant to fighting corruption. Problematically, however, many of the world's most corrupt countries also rank highly in terms of levels of religiosity, suggesting that the relationships between widespread religious adherence and levels of corruption are not straightforward. Attempts to reduce corruption have had limited success, leading to a renewed interest in the role that religious values might play in future initiatives. This study assembles a picture of people's religious beliefs, values, perceptions of corruption, and notions of tradition and modernity, based on extensive semi-structured interviews in several locations across India.

Corruption is widespread, institutionalized and taken for granted in India and religion is central to many people's lives. However, little is known about how religion, morality, ethics, and notions of modernity and tradition influence the context in which corruption occurs or people's perceptions of its nature, causes and potential remedies.

Until recently, research internationally has tended to adopt a quantitative approach. If considered at all, religion and tradition have, like corruption itself, been treated as discrete, objective phenomena. Very little attention has been given to the ways in which people interpret either 'religion' or 'corruption', or how they are perceived to be related. In contrast, this research sought to explore the beliefs, ideas, and meanings embedded in local conceptions of 'religion' and 'corruption', and how these are thought to influence attitudes and behaviour.

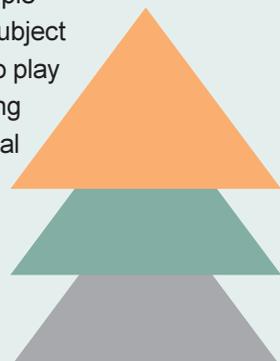
The research aimed to provide insights into whether and how religious values and organizations might support efforts to fight corruption. In-depth interviews were conducted with 120 representatives from a variety of social groups, including the government, academia, the corporate world, development organizations, the media, youth and religious associations, mainly in Andhra Pradesh and Punjab. The interviews explored questions such as:

- What does it mean to be religious?
- How are people's attitudes towards corruption influenced by their religious beliefs?
- How do perceptions of modernity and tradition intersect with religion and corruption?

The research also examined how Hindu and Sikh religious leaders and organizations are perceived, to determine whether they might play a role in anti-corruption efforts.

Some of the key findings are:

- Religion is universally believed to be an essential part of life for Indian people, but its importance varies between individuals and the ways in which people understand and justify their religiosity differ. A distinction is made between ritual practices and the living out of religious tenets in everyday lives, with many believing that overt religiosity does not necessarily signify that a person is 'truly religious'.
- Religion is seen as important for how people construct value systems, but these are subject to myriad influences. The family is said to play much the most important role in developing values. However, the personal, professional or socio-political environment in which a person finds him or herself exerts a strong influence, and often in practice there are contradictions between personal and professional moral codes.



- Some argue that certain religious ideas may encourage tolerance of corruption, for example, *karma* – the attribution of a person’s position and fortunes in this life to actions in previous lives. In addition, some are said to ‘bribe God’ by donating the proceeds of corruption to religious organizations. Religious leaders no longer seem to have moral influence.
- There is little agreement about what constitutes corruption. Some favour narrow/legalistic definitions, including acts such as bribery, misuse of office and misappropriation of public funds and donations. Others advocate broad/moralistic definitions, which view a large number of acts as corrupt, including gift-giving/‘tipping’, nepotism and womanizing.
- Corruption is generally blamed on greed, materialism, the desire to succeed, cumbersome bureaucracy, loopholes in administration and failure to implement rules and laws.
- Tradition is not itself seen as promoting a ‘culture of corruption’ and so cannot be regarded as an obstacle to anti-corruption work. Indeed, in India, most consider that modernity, secularization and consumerism have contributed to the erosion of tradition, and so are responsible for the perceived worsening of corruption.
- Many are not comfortable with a binary distinction between tradition and modernity, regarding themselves as both traditional and modern.
- Corruption continues to thrive in India, unchallenged by religion, partly because factors other than religious values and practices influence people’s attitudes and behaviour and partly because religious leaders and organizations have been discredited in the eyes of many. However, some believe that religion-based morals and narratives could contribute to curbing corruption and creating an environment in which honesty, integrity and hard work are rewarded and celebrated.

Some of the implications for those seeking to comprehend and fight corruption include:

- Corruption, values and the role religion plays in people’s attitudes and lives can only be understood through in-depth research in specific cultural and religious contexts.
- The potential contribution of religion to tackling corruption is limited because in contemporary Indian society, values are subject to many non-religious influences and religious leaders and organizations lack legitimacy.
- Nevertheless, there is untapped potential for religious ethics and narratives to contribute to curbing corruption if religion is not merely interpreted in terms of ritual practices, but its values lived out and translated into moral behaviour. It is believed that spiritual training and values must be infused from childhood. However, it is also thought that the re-assertion and reiteration of moral and ethical ideals can make a difference later in life.

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