

### The role of religion in fighting corruption

Very few respondents thought that religion can be relied on to influence attitudes to corruption, because of the perceived erosion of religious values, people's failure to live up to their ethical values and the apparent decline in the legitimacy of religious leaders and organizations.

Nevertheless, some affirmed the continued relevance of religious teachings, arguing that, if harnessed, 'true' religion can be a powerful force to fight corruption. They acknowledged that values and morals are learnt mainly in the family during childhood and are incompatible with many aspects of contemporary lifestyles and business practices. However, some believe that more vigorous reinforcement of religious teachings through formal education and the media can help to disseminate the values of honesty and integrity.

### Conclusions

A majority of Indians look to religious texts and myths for guidelines on ethical and moral conduct, although other cultural and social factors are also important influences on values. Nevertheless, 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. Further analysis is clearly required: whether and how religion influences people's behaviour and attitudes and how it contributes to public moral development in developing countries is poorly understood. Further research is needed into the nature of corruption in religious organizations and the

impact this has on adherents' attitudes to corruption and behaviour.

*If somebody calls themselves religious, and is still corrupt, they are not following the religion in spirit.*

### Implications

This study sought to provide a better understanding of the relationships between religions, ethics and corruption. Some of the implications of its findings for those seeking to comprehend and fight corruption in India include:

- The potential contribution of religion to tackling corruption appears to be limited because in contemporary India, values are subject to many non-religious influences and religious leaders and organizations are regarded as unaccountable and lacking 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 or value-based messages must be infused from childhood. However, it is also thought by some that the re-assertion and reiteration of moral and ethical ideals can make a difference later in life, if carried out in an innovative manner without coercion.
- Attitudes to corruption and the role of religion in people's values and lives can only be understood through in-depth research that reveals how different social groups interpret value-laden concepts and explain the extent and nature of their influence on attitudes and behaviour in specific cultural and religious contexts. Such research is in its infancy, both in India and internationally.



## Religions and Development Research Programme

### The role of religion in changing social attitudes towards corruption in India

#### Introduction

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. Faith provides many with the language of ethics and, often, an actual 'list' of rules to live by, 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 relationship between widespread religious adherence and reduced corruption is less 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.

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. This research therefore 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 sought to provide insights into whether and how religious values and organizations might support efforts to fight corruption.

The 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. It also examined how Hindu and Sikh religious leaders and organizations are themselves perceived, to determine whether they might play a credible role in anti-corruption efforts. The research provides a more nuanced understanding of the relationships between religion, ethics and corruption, to better equip policy makers and practitioners to fight corruption on the ground.

#### Background

In fighting corruption, policy makers have depended largely on understanding drawn from political and economic analysis, and have neglected consideration of cultural factors. Internationally, research into the causes and consequences of corruption tends to draw heavily on economics, political science and public administration, resulting in a focus on issues of good (or bad) governance, bureaucratic

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#### Further information

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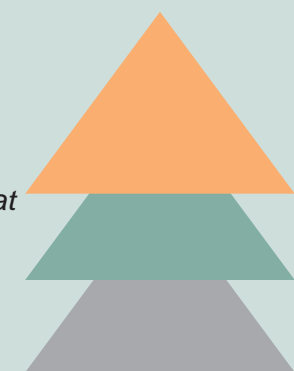
See also Vinod Pavarala (1996) *Interpreting Corruption: Elite Perspectives in India*. New Delhi: Sage Publications

[http://www.indianchild.com/corruption\\_in\\_india.htm](http://www.indianchild.com/corruption_in_india.htm)  
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- 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 or value-based messages must be infused from childhood. However, it is also thought that the moral and ethical ideals can be reinforced later in life.
- Attitudes to corruption and the role of religion in people's values and lives can only be understood through in-depth research in specific cultural and religious contexts. Such research is in its infancy, both in India and internationally.



(in)efficiency, corruption in relationships between businesses and public office holders, and rent-seeking behaviour.

While offering some helpful insights, such analyses do not adequately capture the complexity of the field. Much of the research has adopted a quantitative approach in which, 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 both 'religion' and 'corruption', or how they are perceived to be related. As a result, our understanding of what drives corruption has been limited by a failure to recognize how cultural factors embodied in religion, morality and ideas about modernity influence the context in which corruption occurs, as well as its nature and content.

It is suggested that these are conduits through which religious discourses influence people's everyday lives in specific cultural contexts, influencing the likelihood that they will personally engage in corruption, giving them points of reference for what is 'right' and 'wrong', and offering them guidelines for judging their own and others' actions. The research examined people's understanding of 'religion' and 'corruption', as well as the links between religion and their beliefs, values and perceptions of corruption.

Thirty-nine in-depth interviews and eleven focus group discussions were conducted with a total of 120 representatives from a variety of social groups, including the media, the government, academia, the corporate world, development organizations, youth and religious associations, mainly in Punjab and Andhra Pradesh. The interviews explored questions such as:

- What does it mean to be religious?
- In what ways do religions influence values and codes of conduct - personal as well as professional?
- What do people understand and accept as corrupt?
- How are people's attitudes towards corruption influenced by their religious values or beliefs?
- How do perceptions of tradition and modernity intersect with corruption?
- What role do religious leaders and organizations play in promoting ethical conduct?

The research was carried out in Amritsar, a major city in northern Punjab and home to the Golden Temple, Sikhism's holiest shrine; Chandigarh, the

capital of the region; and Hyderabad, the capital city of Andhra Pradesh. It focused on Hinduism and Sikhism, both of which have places of worship all over India and religious scriptures that offer rich insights into issues related to morality and ethical conduct.

## Key findings

### Understandings of religion and corruption

The ways in which people make sense of concepts such as religion and corruption are complex.

- 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 personal piety, and the living out of religious tenets in people's everyday lives. Many believe that overt religiosity does not necessarily signify that a person is 'truly religious', nor is it a guarantee of virtue. Being aware of right or wrong is acknowledged to be very different from doing right and wrong in real life situations.

*I have imbibed my core values of sacrifice and humility from the Sikh religion. Thinking and behaviour evolves because interaction of various forces at work that may come from religion, from society, or from family. It is a mix of all those.*

Sikh bureaucrat from Chandigarh

- Religion is seen as important for how people construct their value systems, but these are subject to myriad influences. The family is said to play much the most important role in developing values. Friends and a person's peer group are also important, but their influence is more fleeting. 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. Business people in particular distinguish between personal morality, which governs their behaviour within the home, and business decisions and activities, where people tend to be 'flexible' about their personal values because of the professional demands to

which they are subject and where religion is less relevant.

*A businessman from Hyderabad, deeply religious in his personal life, expressed his inability to carry all his religious values into his business practice: "I have to be flexible, I have no choice".*

- Some respondents argued 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, or *pashchatap* – repentance (through bathing in the Ganga). In addition, some are said to 'bribe God' by donating the proceeds of corruption to religious organizations, which are alleged to be happy to accept such donations. Religious leaders and the priestly class no longer seem to have moral influence, especially in the eyes of young men and women, who perceive religion to be 'in the wrong hands', misused by 'powerful people' and entrenched in ritual and fanaticism, rather than reflective of a 'true' religious spirit. Many express cynicism towards religious leaders who preach the importance of accountability while themselves remaining unaccountable.

*I know a large number of businesses who will donate 5 per cent to a temple or maybe to some charity. This is how we try to overcome our guilty conscience, by co-opting God as one of the stakeholders.*

Chief, Anti-corruption Bureau, Hyderabad

- There is little agreement about what constitutes corruption. Although the idea that it concerns the misuse of public office for private gain is widespread, some defined it more broadly as deviation from any code of conduct. Some, especially bureaucrats and corporate executives, favoured narrow/legalistic definitions, listing a limited number of acts, such as bribery, misuse of office and misappropriation of public funds and donations. Others advocated broad/moralistic definitions, under which a large number of acts are viewed as corrupt, including gift-

giving, nepotism and womanizing.

### Changing social values and corruption

Respondents attributed the persistence and intensification of corruption not only to people's failure to put religious values into practice, but also to wider social changes:

- Increased levels of corruption are generally blamed on changes in societal values and attitudes (greed, materialism, the desire to succeed, the perceived likelihood of 'getting away with it'), practical problems (cumbersome bureaucracy, administrative loopholes, failure to implement rules and laws, and a lack of effective punishments).

*Consumerism has definitely had an effect on the moral values of the individuals and the society at large... People are indulging in corruption because of consumerism – I want my iPod, my dress, my accessories.*

University students.

- 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 are contributing to the erosion of tradition, and so contribute to the perceived worsening of corruption. Claiming that traditionally, Indian culture was characterized by 'simple living and high thinking', many respondents evoked the time when flaunting wealth was considered bad behaviour. It is believed that there has been a gradual erosion of cultural values, resulting in personal interests supplanting the public good in all spheres of life.
- Many of those interviewed were not comfortable with a binary distinction between tradition and modernity, regarding themselves as both 'traditional' and 'modern'. They see religion as central to India's cultural ethos and social fabric but many believe that in their own lives it can co-exist with a liberal, cosmopolitan and global outlook. They believe that the modern can co-exist with the traditional, if modern is defined as progressive thinking and openness to new ideas and ways of life. This interpretation fits well with a willingness to maintain traditions that are considered productive, while rejecting others that are considered to promote corrupt or unethical behaviour.