**Religions and Development Research Programme**

# Religions, ethics and attitudes towards corruption in India

## Workshop held on 28th-29th January, 2010 at the University of Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh, India

In countries where religion plays a vital role in the lives of most people, it has often been assumed that many, including public servants, derive their ethical framework from their religion. Religions provide a language of ethics and, often, an actual 'list' of rules to live by, some of which may be of particular importance in fighting corruption. Despite this, many of the most corrupt countries in the world (according to Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index) also rank high in terms of religiosity (using indicators such as those used by the Pew Global Attitudes Project). This raises some important questions: do people separate public and private morality? Are attitudes towards corruption informed by religious teachings? In particular, do public servants see religious teachings concerned with ethics as applying to their work or do they see them as either irrelevant or difficult to implement in practice? Does the specific religion make a difference to attitudes towards corrupt behaviour? Do the actions of religious leaders, by either publicly condemning corruption or engaging in corrupt activities themselves, make a difference to followers' attitudes towards corrupt behaviour?

The purpose of this workshop was to develop a better understanding of the relationships between religion, ethics and attitudes towards corruption, drawing on the findings of recent empirical research in India. The emerging findings and their implications were discussed by an invited audience of about twenty bureaucrats, development workers, media persons, academics, corporate executives, representatives of faith-based organizations and anti-corruption actors.

## The research findings

The findings of the research in Punjab and Andhra Pradesh were presented by **Professor Vinod Pavarala** and **Dr Kanchan Malik** of the School of Arts and Communication, University of Hyderabad.

### Aims of the research

Corruption is prevalent in India and abundantly researched, but there is little consensus on its meanings, causes, consequences or remedies. Existing research mostly has a material understanding of corruption, explaining it in terms of structural factors such as political dynamics, bureaucratic inefficiency or the search for individual gain. Cultural factors embodied in religion, morality, ethics, and notions of modernity and tradition are neglected.

This study therefore focuses on how religious beliefs, values, morals, and ethics influence perceptions of corruption in different socio-cultural contexts. It examines people's ideas, beliefs and claims about corruption, religion, and the linkages between them. Its aim is to provide a better understanding of the relationships between religions, ethics, and corruption and to explore the implications of the findings for policymakers seeking to comprehend and fight corruption.

The research therefore addresses two main questions:

- ***How are religion and corruption understood in India today?*** The research sets out to unpack how 'religiosity' and 'corruption' are understood by different categories of informants and what ideas and beliefs influence the perceptions of people when they categorize themselves or others as being 'religious' or 'corrupt'.

- ***What are the perceived influences of religion on attitudes to corruption?*** The research also aims to identify people's perceptions of the role of religion – values, texts, leaders and/or organizations – in shaping attitudes to corruption. It seeks to understand the influences that shape people's value systems, and the extent to which the patterns of thought and behaviour, and personal and professional codes of practice, of different categories of respondents are shaped by both religious and non-religious factors. Do people consider that strong religious beliefs and values are in practice translated into less corrupt behaviour in the public realm? What factors other than religion are thought to significantly influence people's attitudes and behaviours towards corruption?

Using semi-structured in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, the views of a wide range of respondents were sought, including leaders and ordinary members of selected religious organizations, policy makers and staff in selected public agencies and business enterprises, members of NGOs, young people, media persons, academics and those engaged in anti-corruption policy design and implementation – 120 in total. The research focused on Sikhism and Hinduism, with field work in Amritsar, Punjab, home to the holiest shrine of the Sikhs, the Golden Temple; Chandigarh, a union territory and the capital city of Punjab; and Hyderabad, the capital city of the southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh

## Emerging findings

### Corruption, religion and Indian society

- Religion is central to the lives of people in India, although the extent and nature of the role it plays varies significantly from person to person and many acknowledge that they are agnostic if rarely atheist. Notions of religiosity vary greatly and religion means different things to different people. A common perception is that those who profess to be 'religious' are not necessarily morally and ethically strong: religiosity is not considered to be a guarantee of virtue. Nevertheless, it is commonly considered to be a potent tool for promoting moral and ethical conduct and inculcating discipline, if its 'true essence' is understood.

- Religion is part of India's culture and social fabric, but according to many respondents is regarded by many as a matter of rituals and public events, that are not linked to behaviour and actions. For many, especially professionals, religion co-exists with a liberal, cosmopolitan and global outlook. While many professionals admit that they do not routinely participate in religious rituals, others emphasize that their religion has ritual, spiritual and value dimensions. Traditional business persons were emphatic in highlighting the importance of both the ritualistic and the symbolic characteristics of religion in their lives, while development actors regard religion as providing inspiration and a motivation for doing social good.

- Value systems are considered to be rooted in various culture-specific influences, including family ideals, upbringing, religion, education, social status and socialization. Human behaviour is also deemed to be governed by the circumstances and the social environment. The majority of professionals report that they derive their commitment to following service rules from values imbibed during their upbringing.

Family values thus exercise considerable influence on professional ethics, whereas friends and peer groups have lesser and often transitory influence.

- The young, middle aged and seniors consider being modern as being progressive in thinking and open to new ideas and ways of life and do not regard it as incompatible with tradition, which can be followed selectively, for example by rejecting traditions that may encourage corrupt or unethical behaviour. They regard themselves as "both traditional and modern."

- Both Sikh and Hindu professionals, including bureaucrats, media persons, development workers and academics, consider that religion does play a role in prompting ethical conduct in different domains of life, including the personal, social and professional spheres. Many informants believe that if the 'core spirit' of a religion is recognized and followed, then there is no disconnect between personal and professional ethical codes. However, most corporate executives and business persons make a clear distinction between personal morality and their business decisions and activities. Religion was considered to come in handy within the home, but to be less relevant outside it, where, they noted, they and their peers tend to be 'flexible' about personal values owing to the demands of their profession or business. Thus in the professional arena, the urge to succeed or deliver results is considered to generally overwhelm religious convictions about what is right and wrong.

- Some argue that certain attributes of religion, especially Hinduism (like fatalism and *karma* - deeds/actions in a previous life), may encourage tolerance of corruption. In addition, instances are cited of people engaging in corruption in the name of God or making God 'a stakeholder' in corruption by using ill-gotten wealth for the construction of temples or charity.

- There was no single shared definition of 'corruption' amongst the members of the various social groups included in the research. Notions of what are corrupt and non-corrupt actions are varied and often ambiguous, with little agreement, except perhaps on 'outright bribery'. Most agree that corruption refers to the misuse of public office for private gain, although some define it more broadly as any deviation from a specified code of conduct in any sphere of life.

- Those who prefer a narrow/legalistic definition list a limited number of acts as corrupt, including bribery, misuse of office, and misappropriation of public funds and donations. A clear majority include acts that involve 'monetary exchange' but exclude gift-giving, adultery and nepotism. Most of the bureaucrats and corporate executives offer a narrow/legalistic definition, while other groups are roughly equally divided between those who adopt this definition and those who define corruption in broad moralistic terms. The latter listed a larger number of acts as corrupt, including gift-giving, nepotism, womanizing, tipping and dowry.

- There is a common feeling that there has been a gradual erosion of cultural values, resulting in a widespread 'culture of corruption', with personal interests taking precedence over the public good in all spheres of life. Today, it is alleged, some people proudly admit how much they receive as bribes. Non-implementation of rules and laws is held responsible for encouraging corrupt acts.

- Just as there is no single clear definition of corruption, different factors are held responsible for the prevalence and perceived intensification of corruption in India. Loopholes in the system, income disparities, changes in societal values, greed, the temptation to make easy money, taking shortcuts to save time, the lack of penalties

and the lack of positive role-models were identified as some of the causes, in addition to an attitude that "we can get away with it". Thus the blame for rampant corruption is put squarely on the 'consumerist' and 'materialistic' aspects of modernization. Claiming that 'simple living and high thinking' is one of the central planks of 'Indian culture', many respondents evoke the times when flaunting wealth was considered bad behaviour and condemn the excessive 'having more' syndrome.

### *Tackling corruption: a role for religion?*

- The research shows that, despite contemporary social and cultural trends, many people share a deep-seated faith in the potential of religion to enrich the value system and a popular sentiment that if its 'true meaning' is understood and harnessed, religion can be a powerful force in fighting corruption.

- The need was expressed for religious messages to be clearly articulated and advocated. In addition to an emphasis on universal values and ethics, it is suggested, religion-based narratives and values need to be popularized. Examples of the moral codes contained in religious texts and their relevance to the present day should, respondents suggested, be accompanied by more vigorous reinforcement of religious teachings through formal education and the media. People expressed the view that this would keep desirable values alive, despite their apparent incompatibility with contemporary lifestyles.

- Respondents believe that spiritual training and value-based messages can make a difference only if these are infused from childhood, although it is also felt that reiteration and reinforcement of moral and ethical ideals is needed, if done without coercion, through accessible religious texts. The role of the family is considered indispensable in internalizing religious values and promoting moral and ethical conduct, but needs to be supported by wider social acceptance of high moral standards.

- However, it is believed that religious leaders and the priestly class no longer wield extensive moral influence, especially over young men and women, who typically see them as preachers who are not accountable in practice. Those who manage prominent places of worship are often believed to be corrupt and are not perceived as walking the 'righteous path'. Thus many consider religion to have been discredited, not because it is deficient in itself, but because of disillusionment with those who claim to be its caretakers, particularly on the part of young people, who consider that religion is in the wrong hands, is misused by 'powerful' people and stresses rituals and fanaticism rather than its true spirit.

- Overall, while respondents believe that religion, religious values and religious organizations cannot be ignored in attempts to combat corruption, they also acknowledge that 'bringing religion in' cannot be a panacea.

## Main themes of the discussion

Few participants in the workshop found the research results surprising. They stressed the need to distinguish between types of corruption, in particular petty corruption (which is seen as being necessary to 'get things done') and 'unacceptable' corrupt behaviour (e.g. political or corporate corruption), which is engaged in by others. They noted the apparent contradiction between respondents' view that there is little relationship between religion and attitudes to corruption and their belief that adherence to 'true religion' deters corrupt behaviour.

The consensus among participants was that the research points to a clear policy message: that religion in itself cannot be relied on to influence attitudes towards corruption. They noted that other factors may play a more important role in creating a civic culture and a shared public morality, while religion can never substitute for a functioning legal system through which corruption is investigated and punished.

To some extent, they suggested, the difficulty in identifying a role for religion is an institutional issue, especially in the case of Hinduism, which lacks core religious texts, central leaders and regular meetings during which messages are imparted. Moreover, most of the participants doubted that religious organizations, including religious political parties, can play a positive role in efforts to combat corruption, because in their view such organizations regard themselves as accountable only to God and so are not accountable in the sense used in the governance literature and good governance practices.

Analysis of the research findings is continuing and various outputs are planned for publication during 2010 – they will be made available on www.rad.bham.ac.uk