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The discourse on „corruption“ and the Indian case¹

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Abstract: The suitability of ‚conventional‘ (modernist) versus ‚post‘-modernist notions of corruption is discussed, and as a way out of conventional approaches various (anthropological and multi-disciplinary) foci on the body, originating from several theoretical directions, are considered. Questions of legitimacy (licitness and illicitness), of the hierarchy of social/ cultural orders are also discussed. It is argued that the anthropological study of corruption should include theoretical questions such as reciprocity or theories of exchange, the logic of the state and of corrupt actors (dimensions of power), and the humanistic dimension of suffering: *who suffers* (victims) and who profits. The case of India is discussed in chronological-cultural depth and current trends, again pointing to a future approach focusing on the suffering of the people.

Keywords: corruption (India), discourse on corruption, suffering and corruption, state and corruption, organized crime, culture and corruption, body and corruption, Mont Pèlerin Society, neoliberalism, legitimacy, hierarchy of orders, failed states, globalization and corruption, clientelism, Big man rule, modernity and corruption, liberalization, Bofors scandal, elites and corruption, reciprocity.

Conceptual Preliminaries

The title word in quotation marks points to the ambiguity of the term. I will first discuss corruption from a general anthropological perspective, but results and perspectives other disciplines such as economics, sociology, political science, history, and philosophy will also be discussed when appropriate.

¹ This paper originated in a lecture at the *Institut für Ethnologie*, University of Heidelberg, Germany, December 10, 2013.

In doing so I do not take a state-centered perspective for granted (the „state“ versus corruption) but will start from the respective empirical situation which may be otherwise despite many cases showing the „state and corruption“ situation, however. We will see that even in these cases the perspective taken or the way the course of affairs is interpreted may result in conclusions very different from the common state-corruption opposition. So I do not privilege the state but will only ask: What does a „corrupt“ situation mean for the people, corruptors as well as those passively concerned? In asking this I focus on their possible suffering or well-being, with, or without the state. I will relate this to aspects of recent theories of the body, and, yes, with very few „corporeal“ parameters that seem to be widespread (if not „universal“), such as the infliction of physical and structural pain (violence), or rather its absence or avoidance, and conditions connected with it: food, shelter and free expression within the agreed-upon limits of the community.

I do not see a necessity to deduce the complex of corruption from a „last“ or axiomatic entity (of western thought), a philosophical tradition, or the need to anchor my argument to a kind of metanarrative. Instead, I will apply a historical and „creatural“ („natural“) frame, relating to humans as bodies with their reactions, cognate to the frame envisioned by Bataille in his study of the abolition of economy (2001) to which I will come back later. In refusing to posit a last ground, an original starting point, I will also refer to Laclau's (1996) post-foundationalism.

This kind of refusal has been voiced by others before him, such as Derrida (1992:24f.) who deconstructed the (ethnocentric) Aristotelian concept of states of the „soul“, the *logos* getting translated and expressed in the voice only, which established this process and view of the sign as universal. Instead, Derrida showed that there is no secure, no last entity but only semioses of changes and substitutions of meanings, a beginningless chain. This perspective very much corresponds to an anthropological insight of recent decades when anthropologists did not search for „origins“ any more – looking for the original „tribe“ or ethnographic situation, just as philologists used to search for the „original“ text. They do so because there *are* no „original“ situations: In all cases there have been processes *before* a „golden“ original which is just as mythical as any golden age of the past. But even while we forsake this kind of foundationalism we cannot escape being caught, positioned somewhere, in the endless chain of events, of history, being bound and formed by previous things; it is not possible to „un-inherit“ past processes and conditions (Abeysekara 2008).

Body foci on corruption

To argue with Bataille's ‚creatural frame‘ dealing with the body, which I will use as a conceptual background at the end of this paper is not the common, or mainstream road. My own concrete and ‚primary‘ body approach in relation to corruption focuses on the suffering of people, as will become manifest throughout the paper.

Robertson, too, had declared to „focus on the ‚body‘ part of the moral calculus of corruption“ (2006:8) but he had something very different in mind. He chose *the body* to avoid the widespread (western) dualist bias of separating the law or institution (as legitimate), and corrupt actors (as illegitimate), using the phrasing of ‚somebody‘ committing corrupt actions to avoid, one being ‚good‘, the other ‚bad‘, so he harbors a critique of the so-called institutions/states as being the good guys. His starting point agrees with traditional definitions of corruption as action involving officials violating official laws for personal gain. In Robertson's logic the person is „separated“ from the official corpus of rules (the law) if the corrupt case is detected and becomes public – and the person (he calls it the ‚body‘, playing with the word ‚some-body‘), that is, some *body*, gets the blame for corruption, *not* the system (the corporation or institution): Behind corporations „which are bodies“ the ‚bodies‘ of individual persons may hide, he says: there is a separation of the person and the corporation. As a result, according to Robertson, individual deviant bodies are blamed and separated from the system – and the system remains ‚clean‘.

When Robertson conceptualizes corporations as „individual bodies“ („transcendent meta-bodies“ – *ibid.*) or actors in his analysis, he agrees, without mentioning it, with the neo-liberal concept of the person, since one major argument in the 1930s, by protagonists of the movement of the Mont Pèlerin Society, was that there should be „freedom“ to act, and what they had in mind was to establish corporations *as* ‚individual persons‘: what they meant was the freedom for these entities to economically plunder (Harvey 2007:49f.; Polanyi 2001) – there is a good and a bad kind of freedom (Harvey 2007:49).

Definitions

Although probably most anthropologists will have some contact with corruption in the course of fieldwork, there are relatively few studies focusing directly on corruption as a major focus of research. Because, similar to organized crime and Mafias, corruption

thrives in the underground; it is not openly visible and needs to hide because it is illegal. Therefore it is difficult to trace (Haller & Shore 2005:11ff.; de Vries 2008, Robertson 2006:8). And if anthropologists become part of such actions, they too might have to participate in illegal dealings. So some have reverted to recording what people say and think about corruption, instead of getting involved directly.

What does corruption mean? Recent anthropological studies since about 2005² have stressed that a clear-cut definition is not possible and feasible, because the classical dichotomizing view, that it would be simply opposed to the ‚right state of affairs‘ represented by laws, is not tenable³. Instead, and agreeing with the anthropological principle of holism, new studies tend to include more contexts in order to understand and interpret these phenomena. Before the time of refraining from simple, dualist definitions, corruption used to be framed according to the much-cited sentence of the World Bank as „the abuse of public office for private gain“. This presupposes an opposition of public and private, which, as we know, may not exist in some cultures, so the World Bank definition cannot be universal even for this reason – and there are others.

A conventional, common-place content of corruption has three subdivisions: 1) the embezzlement of public money; 2) bribery involving officials – for personal profit (either the official, or the ‚applicant‘/client); 3) and favoritism which can take the shape of nepotism (favoring kin), or clientelism (favoring others) (Kondos 1987:16). Another common categorization is to divide it in small (petty, or everyday) corruption and big or grand corruption in politics and economy.

States, corrupt actors, and transgressions

Recently, in the face of increasing and international corporate crime⁴, definitions have been extended to the „abuse of any sort of entrusted authority“ (Sampson 2005:106), which now includes non-state institutions like corporations in an economic sense (Robertson 2006). The abuse can occur individually (occupational crime) or by institutions (corporate crime) as a whole. Then there are corrupt states, either towards

² E.g. Haller & Shore 2005; van Schendel & Abraham 2005:1ff.; Nuijten & Anders 2008; Fels 2008.

³ „Students of illicit practices need to begin by discarding the assumption that there is a clear line between illicitness and the laws of states.“ (Abraham & van Schendel 2005:7)

⁴ If one deplores an increase of corruption or crime of, say, 20% during the last thirty years one should not forget that the population may have increased by 30%, and hence, this would mean a *decline* in the corruption rate!

their population or other states; so states have to be considered as possible corrupt actors (Anders & Nuijten 2008:13). And some authors have described national states applying neoliberal strategies as criminal actors, operating against the public interest⁵ (Nonini 2005:24ff.). Failed states (Friedrichs 2007; Karstedt 2007) may be considered, too, in the study of corruption.

Apart from these examples the authority of the state as such, exemplified in rules, bureaucracy and hence laws is likewise rather „relative“ as Bourdieu has shown in the case of state bureaucracy. He has traced these rules back to individuals who created them (Bourdieu 2006:21, 26) and shows how bureaucratic rules and personal habitus are intertwined, that these rules and their „execution“ are a game played by individual officials at the ‚end‘ point of the rule trickling down to them. Bourdieu has concluded that „the real workings of the bureaucratic order rests on the subtle casuistry of the law and its circumvention“ (ibid. 25; my translation). So there is always this game (as Bourdieu calls it) of bureaucracy and its application, of the ideal and reality, the rule and its probably twisted operation by functionaries – arbitrary in the last sense, which also explains the process of *corruption*. So the law is *not* separable from the persons applying and administering it. And it will be changed by them, opines Bourdieu: There are strategies of strict adherence and of transgression, or in a more neutral wording, of change. The difference of deviating from the law, whether it is small or big corruption, is only gradual (Bourdieu 2006:25), and the application, non-application, or legitimate circumvention of rules depends, in each singular case, on the habitus and interests of individual agents: they „practice quasi monopolistic control of the rule’s application in the individual case“ (ibid. 26, my translation). Bourdieu’s depiction of corrupt practices thus presents a kind of continuum, the law and various actors are interwoven. Robertson (2006) on the other hand, as stated above, stresses a *separation* of the law (the „corporation“) and the „bodies“ of people transgressing: Corrupt persons will, in cases of accusation, be separated from the institution and punished while the corporation stays correct and legitimate. So in Robertson’s view corruptors are victims while in Bourdieu’s description they show agency in using and manipulating the law.

The real challenge to the positive law of the state, the ‚ultimate‘ legitimation of rules, comes increasingly to the fore in the global frame: in globalization, transnationalism and

⁵ Nonini argues that a small number of actors in government positions, having been managers in big corporations before, „steal“ public property through the sell-out occurring in privatization. This personnel switches jobs between big corporations, the government, and back to corporations after a few years, securing gains or profits for their corporations while in government service.

international law, or in the idea of a juridical system for the whole planet. The positive law of a limited area on the globe, like in a state, aims at regulating and protecting the people living in it; the state commonly has the monopoly of violence, of sanction – which should grant a certain security to the people. This is the legitimation of the law, it justifies violence of the state in order to avoid violence by others. And states also declare war on other states in order to protect their own citizens – or, it happens that they do so for reasons of robbery, land annexure etc. This follows a seemingly „natural and justified“ intrastrate logic (Derrida 1991a:84f.), but what, if after processes of globalization only one ‚state‘ is left? In this ‚total‘ state there cannot be extra-state enemies any more, and we can only hope that there will be mechanisms *within* (and in my view, not necessarily outside, beyond or ‚above‘) the juridical system that control, renew and reform it. As things are, there is continuity – new laws will be generated out of earlier systems, or to conceive it with Abeysekara, already mentioned above: It is not possible to „un-inherit“ our past (Abeysekara 2008:2f.). People and institutions are the product of past processes. But Derrida poses the question of the general strike – that reading the law and interpreting it includes the possibility of such a strike (Derrida 1991a:81), interpretation (of the past) harbors overthrowing the status quo and hence he seems to legitimize a form of violence – *not* of the state but of individuals or group logic or action, the grassroot level, emerging out of sentiments of justice or injustice.

So in the absence of several/many national states, if only one is left, a unified juridical system cannot be ‚fraudulent‘ any more if it attacks other states. And if this new monosystem is consistent, what will be its Other and possible critic, or even enemy? Will individual citizens and/or institutions, corporations, be the only ones able to overthrow it, and will they be natural enemies of the state? How far will governmental institutions go to combat the people? Will they strive for total control?

So what we deal with is transgressions – against rules, norms of the community, and they may be as old as humankind, as envisioned by Bataille (1963). To him, transgressions first appeared with the emergence of human consciousness, in the early days when men started to ‚work‘ and became conscious of death, buried their dead, and Bataille opined that sexuality became shameful in these early days, as a repercussion of the effects of work (1963:34f.). Hence, bans, or prohibitions came up, in cases of murder (associated with the consciousness of death), incest, and so on. For Bataille, the beginnings of law were caused by the beginnings of work, which had effects on human behavior, and this made norms, rules, necessary. I do not think this model is an

evolutionist one, at least not so in a racist sense: because it pertains to all humans. In elaborating transgression Bataille believes that prohibitions are mainly erected against forms of violence (ibid. 49f.), so it would have a somatic basis – and even if, in his interpretation, this was religiously motivated first, it nevertheless directly connects us with the monopoly of violence of nation states. It was the fear of death and avoidance of murder, based on the dawning consciousness of these facts and deeds, that may have been the beginning of law or prohibitions.

In the context of corruption, transgression is materially or ‚thisworldly‘ motivated and we do not need the quasi-transcendental background elaborated by Bataille. A last (ultimate‘) justification of the law, positioned behind or above it is not needed when „disregarding the traffic lights“ and the like has clearly realizable effects on the body; it is evident and justified by immediate material logic, avoidance of accident and physical suffering. I do not intend to erect metaphysical fortresses or a metanarrative when this way of thinking has long been abandoned.

Laclau has his own answer to corruption which he construes in the context of his ideas about populism (which may be seen in the context of big-man politics, and hence, corruption, as I will argue below). He sees „an anti-institutional dimension, ... a certain challenge to political normalization, to ‚business as usual‘“ (Laclau 2005:123) in envisioning ways of political community other than conventional ones such as nation states. His focus here is quite heavily on the individual political actor, a hero, like „the bandit, whose appeal stems from the fact that the bandit is outside the legal system, and challenging it.“ (Ibid.) This may happen occasionally, but Laclau makes a rule out of it: Any institutionalized *body* (a state, a corporation) will mean some limitations to persons, and hence, figures challenging it will be appealing, and Laclau mentions contexts of corruption here, too (ibid.:90, 122, 187, 201). But evidently there are major cultural differences regarding this type of behavior and reaction – for instance between the USA and central Europe: In our times, singular saving heroes (saviors) have much more appeal in the US than in central European countries, and I have tried to explain reasons for this elsewhere (Oberdiek 2013:34ff.). So Laclau flirts with deviance, which is understandable for a Marxist of course. He may have political deviance in mind, but in talking about corruption (Laclau 2005:122) the setting may be different in most cases, and it is possible that we just deal with economic deviance.

Legitimate-illegitimate structural relations – or what?

Coming back to the conventional dichotomy of right and wrong, the legitimate state versus illegitimate corruption as being too simplistic particularly for purposes of anthropological research, we still *have* the fact of the state, phenomena termed corruption, and related norms and values. In his book about the state (1997), Michael Taussig has written that talk and speculation about corruption would be a form of „state fetishism“ (quoted in de Vries 2008:144). This may be true, but are there other possibilities – tribalism, anarchy, some form of autopoiesis – in the face of processes like the 2008 world financial crisis? Therefore, I argue that for analytical purposes and on a human or existential level it is meaningful to conceptualize the state and corruption as different *spheres* (if we actually deal with a state/corruption situation): I propose to describe it as two kinds of orders – a legitimate, official one, and in the case of corruption another, *not* legitimized and subverting, and expropriating the first one. For Abraham & van Schendel (2005:1ff.) for instance, questions of what is legal, licit, and illicit, are of central importance. They have generated a matrix of licitness and illicitness, (ibid.20) for them, these are „competing authorities“. ⁶ This situation is usually described as legal plurality (Anders & Nuijten 2008:13) and „interlegality“ (Sousa Santos 1995). But what is decisive here for empirical persons (or groups, institutions, national states) is the question why they chose the official or the transgressive order for action, in their personal behavior. This means there is a *dominance* of one order at a time in an empirical person or institution: It is actually a *hierarchy* of orders based on values, or limited aims and goals which may vary also according to situation, logic or goal at different times. So a corrupt action may be intrinsic in a person, for instance based on values, or it may be more or less imposed upon the person extrinsically, e.g. by social or economic structures, such as a deficient infrastructure. Thus, for understanding and judging corrupt behavior it is important and may be a quite exact and fruitful method, to consider the logic of the *hierarchy* of social orders and related processes in the action of a person. ⁷

⁶ In the matrix, „licit“ is the ideal state (being legal; with the *illegal* „ingredient“ of the underworld and borderland), and „illicit“ is crony capitalism and failed states on the legal side, with anarchy as its *illegal* version.

⁷ It is somewhat difficult here to describe a pluralism of orders as a „parallel order“ (Anders & Nuijten 2008:14) as in the case of the Camorra of Naples because it insinuates an equality of orders – that the orders would be of equal importance, legitimacy, or value, but they are not: one, the Camorra, can be identified as transgression, and state laws are the official, legitimate order serving a decidedly different end on a macro level – so it is actually a *hierarchy* of orders, even though, in the lifeworld of Naples, the Camorra will weigh heavier most of the time. And it is true: If in the case of the lawyer he works on „both

For certain theoretical purposes, like exchange theory, the whole field may be conceived as *one*, of course. But if corruption is framed *solely* in economic or exchange terms – as in the textbook by Hann & Hart (2011) on *Economic Anthropology* – then the whole setting is perceived as a rather technical process. And for the sociologist Priddat (2011) the whole field is *one* with various actors in this economic and power game seeking their advantages; he does not ask who suffers and who profits but focuses on „the system“ only. Questions of (political) legitimacy do not arise in Priddat’s text; he sees corrupt behavior as a „second life economy“ and even as a „second-life circus“, as if corruption were a game.

Because of such difficulties anthropologists, who had until then conventionally studied corruption mainly through approaches like reciprocity or social and categorial relations (Streck 1995) – approaches criticized because of their evolutionist undertones (Haller & Shore 2005) – are now assessing an ethnographic situation by first following its logic from within, that is, emically. In doing so one may find out about views of actors, norms, and possible factions, that means: majorities, minorities, or just a few, like elites. Elites for instance need subordinate people to execute their goals, they need obedient fellow travellers. Karstedt has put it like this: „Crimes of the powerful need the less powerful – this applies to genocide as much as to corruption.“ (2007:88) And even though anthropologists tend to take sides with ‚the people‘ and against ‚universal bureaucratic norms‘ they do not have to do so in cases of corruption, a point of criticism made by Robertson (2006:8).⁸ So majorities, minorities, elites and subordinate helpers – all of these may be actors in the field of corruption, but it is difficult to know percentages, how many people are pro and contra or actively involved. But only on the basis of such knowledge it is possible to decide whether something can be termed as corrupt or dysfunctional for most people.

Difficult to judge are age-old exchange systems existing in a culture, reminding of corruption, upon which the form of a nation state and its institutions have been planted, as in Nepal (Kondos 1987; Adams 2001): Can the old system in this case be understood as ‚corrupt‘ if it agrees with common definitions of corruption? And does the majority reject the old system, or is it a progressivist elite only? Abraham & van Schendel have

sides“ of the law kinds of normative, moral and juridical „confusion“ may occur. But in decisive situations the Mafia will have to comply with state law, e.g. in cases of arrest, court cases and confiscation.

⁸ „For their part, anthropologists have tended to interpret corruption as the collision of universal bureaucratic norms and specific cultural values, an approach which inclines to apologize for the guileless receiver or giver of gifts and blame exogenous forces like the international expansion of capital.“ (Robertson 2006:8)

stated that „...trade, and exchange that characterize illicit traffic are often long-standing, built on ethnic and kin networks that have been in existence for centuries.“ (2005:5) Such cases show that institutions involved and their logic tend to be frayed, without clear-cut boundaries or delimitations of meaning. Furthermore, corruption has become increasingly international, transcending national borders, so there is im- and export of specific forms of corruption – and of course the emergence of new forms, which increases complexity.

As a result, there has been more anti-corruption activity since the late 1990s (Sampson 2005:106), but anthropologists like A.F. Robertson do not believe in increased anti-corruption measures because it would only expand the whole field (2006:9), in other words: It would be a modernist response of conventional control. And van Schendel thinks that authoritarian and „muscular forms of law enforcement“ in combatting transnational illegal action are ineffective (2005:4), that the „alarmist interpretation“ would be mistaken (ibid.). In the case of India, too, Parry has argued that here the seeming increase of corruption, its „widening“ experience by the people, „is an almost inevitable corollary of the expanded reach of the state“ (Parry 2000:52): If the state becomes bigger, which has been the case since Indian independence, there is a greater chance for corruption to emerge, and Parry notes that during the Mughal empire structures were different insofar as government officials received part of the revenue, not salaries; they were *not separated* from ‚the corporation‘ which had been detected as a major cause for corruption to emerge according to Robertson (2006:8), as stated above.

What has been effective, however, in fighting corporate corruption and grand transnational crime, is „corporate naming and shaming“ (Karstedt 2007:88, citing E. Blankenburg), since corporations are „sensitive to threats to their national and international reputation“ (ibid.) – it may harm their business transactions, their exchange processes of goods and capital which should create profit; so such a strategy would aim at economy, profit, and may thus be more attuned to current ideology. Because of such processes Nuijten & Anders have proposed that corruption „should rather be a field of inquiry to understand power relations in society at large.“ (2008:2) Controlling gains and losses *is* power.

Corruption and exchange theory

This is where exchange theory comes in, principles of reciprocity, i.e. economic anthropology to study the ‚mechanics‘ and logic of corruption. This may be augmented, and enhanced by understanding these processes as exchanges of various kinds of capital: Both, the agent offering corrupt goods and the client consuming them will have personal advantages from this transaction, but they will also incur, or exchange it for, the negative fact of deviance from the law – so they will generate a transgression against the principal (the state). Bourdieu’s model of the „economies of forms of practice“, the „social space and its transformations“ (Bourdieu 2010) is useful here.⁹ An example of such conversion is corrupt money spent to remove some of the deviance incurred by illegal practice, and money-laundering itself.

In the corrupt act one person receives something needed, and the other gives or grants it, and the ‚payment‘ moves in the opposite direction, from the former to the latter. The act is usually secret, hidden, which adds an intensifying dimension to it, I believe.¹⁰ So this process of exchange may create an even stronger bond than gift-giving described and analyzed from the times of Malinowski and Mauss onwards.¹¹ General gift-giving is also intense, no question, but the complicity of the Forbidden is lacking, the secretive, which is present in the corrupt act that subverts and expropriates the system of regular, official exchange.

Mauss, in his essay on gift-exchange had stated that the recipient is dependent on the wrath of the giver, and that both are dependent on each other (Mauss 1978,II:115).¹² In corruption, too, the giver can expect to get something – a moral obligation ensues; the gift (in most cases!) establishes a relation between giver and recipient, and the historian Liebersohn believes that „...the gift is morally ambivalent.“ (Liebersohn 2011:169) Ambivalence becomes tangible in discussions on the practices of „hospitality“ gifts distributed to customers by corporations; they have to comply with rules of the official order, the law, to avoid corruption. But not only gifts are ambivalent, the law too is

⁹ I believe to include the capital transformation of Bourdieu in discussing exchange and gift-giving moves beyond the scope of Liebersohn (2011:165-170), whose study on the gift is, no doubt, quite innovative. The last lines of his book (ibid.169f.) present a nice and comprehensive panorama of what actually takes place in gift-giving.

¹⁰ Hillebrandt attests high stability to corrupt reciprocity relations because they are „secret“ (2009:222).

¹¹ The historian Liebersohn has focused on predecessors who influenced them, German economists like Friedrich List and Karl Bücher and the whole discussion of „historical [and national] particularism“ in Germany (Liebersohn 2011:40ff.) – which has in fact been discussed since J.G. Herder onwards.

¹² "Die Gabe ist also etwas, das gegeben werden muß, das empfangen werden muß und das anzunehmen dennoch zugleich gefährlich ist." (Mauss 1978: II:115) And: "Der Nehmer ist vom Zorn des Gebers abhängig, und im Grunde ist jeder vom anderen abhängig." (Ibid.)

„notoriously indeterminate and ambivalent“ (Anders & Nuijten 2008:14) which makes the whole setting difficult to judge, it seems. But I do believe that the principle of holism and sufficient context inclusion in anthropology is best suited to counter difficulties that may arise in reductionist analysis, whether it is in economics, political science, or sociology.

Another useful model for analysis is *Big man rule* known from Melanesia (Sahlins 1963; cf. Bourdieu 2006:26) where factions, generated and dominated by a Big man who secures his influence to meet his goals by granting material assistance to his followers. In this form of rule the major political and organizing principle is legal and legitimate, it represents the first, perhaps singular and official order. In both settings, Big man organization and corruption, there is the striving for advantage and dominance by means of exchange processes, and in both the ambitious striving of individuals is central – as in the case of Rajiv Gandhi (Singh 1999:128ff.), a case of grand corruption, described below.¹³

Another aspect of a politicized exchange theory is, in my view, the element of coercion and even violence rooted to some degree in the ‚modern‘ (classical and neo-classical) and particularly in what one may call a post-modern economic model, neo-liberalism. While classical economic theory was integrated with social processes, in neo-liberalism there is a norm of disembeddedness from society, separating economy from society and, I believe, positioning it as superior, with society being subservient to it.¹⁴ This is relevant in contextualizing corruption, too: The tougher economic theory is, for instance through its extrasocietal or autonomous superior positioning effecting a powerful grip on all areas of life, the harder economic competition will be. And the more actors will

¹³ Among present-day Indian politicians Pavarala (1993:36) has described a group formation process similar to that of Big man societies: „Members of Parliament... enjoy considerable perks for a country like India... They use these facilities and their position in the power structure to distribute patronage to political supporters, friends, and family.“ Even though Pavarala uses the notion of patronage I take the liberty to apply the *Big man* image, too, using it as an ideal type characterized by a combination of an „interest in the general welfare [with] a more profound measure of self-interested cunning and economic calculation“ (Sahlins 1963:289, cited by Lindstrom 1996:65).

¹⁴ But Stiglitz (in Polanyi 2001:XXIV) makes it clear that Polanyi’s notion of this new *disembeddedness* of economy from society, and its domination of society, was not seen as a simple factual condition by Polanyi who thought that such a totalist state of affairs would be utopian and it would never be possible to manifest it, „...it is something that cannot exist.“ (Ibid.) But since the time Polanyi conceptualized his views, technological and other changes have greatly enhanced possibilities of manipulation. And if we combine these with certain cultural-normative processes, the possibilities of influencing, manipulating and normalizing people or states and institutions have increased considerably. Foucault would have been amazed, perhaps. And, needless to say, behind economic action is the dominant ruling principle of making profit, the more, the better. This is the one superior guideline, and it is even necessary due to the logic of the system. The competitive drive in capitalism puts great pressure on individuals, on economic actors. Only those will make it, or prevail, who overtake others in one or another way.

have to search for ways to win, to be ahead, to be an achiever, or better, an over-achiever; and this gets more and more difficult because people get breathless, there seem to be limits to human capacity and health. And here differences between legal official, and illegal, deviant or criminal, and maybe corrupt action come into focus, triggered by the structural violence rooted in economic theory.

Therefore I think that at least three dimensions should be included in the anthropological study of corruption: theoretical questions such as reciprocity or theories of exchange, the logic of the state and of corrupt actors (dimensions of power), and the humanistic dimension of suffering: *who suffers* (victims) and who profits. One may also consider whether anthropologists should do such work, for what reasons, and what happens with the results.

India - Old norms and corruption

Corruption is an age-old phenomenon – even Aristotle has complained about it (Sampson 2005:107), and we will see that it was not different in India, as old Sanskrit texts show.¹⁵ I do not see a categorial difference in processes and phenomena of corruption globally: They occur everywhere, and seem to be similar in different settings: whether it is big corruption among elites („elite cartels“ of managers, aristocracy, politicians, bankers, or ordinary officials – see Alvarado Leyton 2006; Fenelon & Hall 2008; Johnston 2008) or small corruption among officials and shopkeepers.

In India, the two structural types, big and small corruption, to be explained below, seem to be inextricably mixed or conditioned by each other, and I believe they are, among other factors of influence, informed by traditional norms and also because knowledge of such norms and belief therein is easily encountered today. And probably colonialism, Muslim and British rule, will have influenced ways and forms of corruption too. But this requires major historical research which cannot be presented here; a case touching this subject is the framing of Batni (2014) to be discussed below.

Present-day behavior, norms and values followed, have already been described in old law books, Sanskrit texts of law, religion, and society. There are terms for corruption in

¹⁵ In a small book about violence in India, mainly towards Dalits, the lowest strata of society, the indologist Slaje speaks of a „millennia-old societal orthopraxis“, citing old texts (Slaje 2012:22). He deals with certain phenomena of violence in Indian society and culture and uses an approach of diving into the past to explain current phenomena: „Die gesellschaftlich breite Streuung legt nahe, dem Ursprung dieser Phänomene dort nachzuspüren, wo man ihre Verankerung zu vermuten hat, nämlich in der zeitlichen Tiefe der sie legitimierenden Ideen.“ (2012:5)

Sanskrit and Hindi¹⁶, overlapping or even congruent with western notions. The western word, derived from Latin *corrumpere*, means something rotten, departed from the right, correct, or acknowledged path. Acknowledgement or institution of the norms may differ according to the political form of the community: It may be imposed from above in a dictatorship or consensus-driven in a democracy. So it may be voluntarily shared by many, or people are forced against their will and conviction by using sanctions. Implicated in this word is the opposition and comparison of two states: the right, and the wrong one; it is a statement of difference. If there is only one state, one order without deviation from it, one cannot speak of corruption, even if it is an order based on nepotism, clientelism and the like. It is the deviation from the ‚right‘ path, from the rule, a departure from what has been defined as correct, official and legal, and therefore legitimate, which is categorized as ‚corrupt‘ in a setting.

Some terms for corruption are, in Sanskrit: *utkoca*, *śulka*, *dūṣaṇa*, *dūṣita* – and in Hindi: *utkoc*, *suidhā śulk*, *bhraṣṭācār*, *ghūs*, *riśvat*, and the semantics of these Indian terms coincide with the western notion. Often these terms mean rottenness, vice, or impurity. Bribery and corruption appear in juridical literature, the *dharmaśāstras*, and in books on statecraft, *arthaśāstras*. To contextualize corruption ethnographically I shall briefly mention three cases in the *Arthaśāstra*, the *Manusmṛti*, and in the concept of *yugas*.

Arthaśāstra (about 300 BCE)

In Kauṭalya’s book on statecraft, the *Arthaśāstra*, lying and cheating have apparently been common. This becomes visible in the design to counter them: Officials have been put to the test, and if their fraudulent behavior was proven they had been evicted (cf. Scharfe 1993:205; Thakur 1979:16ff.).

Manusmṛti/Manavadharmaśāstra (ca. 200 BCE to 200 CE)

The *Manusmṛti* (Doniger 1991:310, and index) has used the terms *dūṣaṇa* and *dūṣita* (*Manusmṛti* 2.213; 3.164; 8.64) for corruption, and the contexts in which they appear are familiar. They are derived from the root *du* (becoming rotten, become corrupted, to become impure, become ruined, make a mistake, being mistaken). And they include bribery, in the case of officials. Bribing officials is mentioned in *Manusmṛti* 7.120-124 and 9.232, and 7.120-124 has the heading „Guarding against corruption“. This

¹⁶ Terms in Oriya are discussed by Mohapatra (1998:318).

paragraph deals with the deployment of a consultant controlling all officials, even by using spies, to avoid irregularities, which obviously included corruption in the general and wider sense of rottenness or depravity on the one hand, but on the other hand it meant directly bribing officials.

Here, and in other related texts, an apparatus of surveillance of the administration is described – from the village mayor to the highest regional rulers under the king. Such a ‚consultant‘ reporting to the king then deployed persons in the smaller units like villages and towns who reported local events to superiors, and the use and operation of spies was scheduled as well (*Manusmṛti* 7.122). The explicit reason for using local officials is: „For the men who are appointed by the king to protect (his subjects) generally become hypocrites (hipocrits) who take the property of others, and he must protect those subjects from them.“ (*Manusmṛti* 7.123/Doniger 1991:141). As a sanction, the property of persons found guilty had to be confiscated (ibid.:124).

The yugas and their description of corrupt conditions

The Hindu theological complex of the cyclically reappearing four yugas, or ages of the world (cf. Kirfel 1967:91f.; González-Reimann 2002), is relevant as a cultural background for studying corruption. The concept is rather old and was fully established in the Mahābhārata epic (ca. 400 BCE-400CE), the Padma-Purāṇa (ca. 700), and it is connected to astronomy and astrology.¹⁷

Yugas are characterized by increasing or decreasing moral quality, that is, the ‚worst‘ age has corruptions of all kinds. Good yugas and bad ones are conceived as an eternal up and down of virtue and vice: the reign of morality in the Kṛta Yuga, or its complete absence in the Kali Yuga. Good yugas are long, the worst (Kali) is only one fourth of the Kṛta – and justice among humans is also only one fourth!¹⁸ Conspicuously, in the texts, the *present* age is the lowest, or Kali Yuga. This makes the teaching a pessimistic one, but it is utopian and millennial as well: Since the golden age (Kṛta) will come at a certain point of time, it is millennial, too. Because the Kali Yuga lasts for 432 000 years according to orthodox Brahmanical interpretation no one will be able escape it in the

¹⁷ In the course of time the heterogeneous sources of the yuga concept have been fused into one system (González-Reimann 2002:8f.).

¹⁸ Cf. Kirfel 1967:92. The yuga corruptions, or deviations from „the right path“ are explained on a level of substances (guṇas, in the Sāṃkhya system of philosophy) and by some on an astronomical or astrological level, the proximity to, or distance of the earth from a positive astronomical center.

present lifetime – but as an individual way out there is religion, personal spiritual enhancement to escape present negative world conditions.

So negative conditions in the presently reigning Kali yuga include corruption and all sorts of deceit (Manusmṛti I:68-73, 79-86; IX:298-302). These accounts may suggest that authors reflected or described prevailing conditions of their time, the status quo.¹⁹ And since conditions were negative they may have declared their own lifeworld to be the worst. This belief is widely shared among Hindus even today. Starting from this negative positioning of living conditions the old authors constructed grades of better worlds – filled with positive normative ideas and states of existence, based on religious thought.²⁰ And since the system is circular, this means that good yugas have reigned in the past and are to be expected in the future as well.

To conclude from old texts of statecraft and the yuga concept we may say that in them – and for their target group – corruption occurring in everyday life was taken for granted and measures against it were described. This does not tell us how people experienced life, who actually suffered from this type of corruption. Unfortunately, there are hardly reports of the life of the people in those times. One of the few examples, the autobiography of the 16th century North Indian merchant Banārasīdās (Sharma 1970; Sangar 1967), has only very few remarks on corruption.²¹

¹⁹ Mylius (1983:145) thinks that descriptions of the negative Kali-Yuga in old purāṇic texts may refer to the invasions of Hūṇa armies in the 5th century, and González-Reimann also considers invasions as a source of inspiration (2002:170).

²⁰ This may have been utopian and might have had the effect of psychological relief. The various Purāṇas have constructed the yuga concept in specific ways serving their purposes (González-Reimann 2002:177), and modern religious movements – and authors – use the yuga concept in their own ways (ibid.180ff.). Today one can observe relief or escapist behavior from pressing life circumstances, an outlet, in the relieving function of the cinema: When millions of people take refuge, for a few hours, in air-conditioned movie theaters where on the one hand ambivalent worlds of conflicting forces fight with each other, but where Happy Ends are the rule – which invariably happens to be constructed according to normative standard rules, namely, widespread norms of marriage in which the good guy eventually, after much emotional turmoil, marries the good girl.

Mohapatra (1998:319ff.) first portrays the yuga concept according to which in present times there are numerous ways of behavior violating and transgressing established Hindu social norms. Following this he interprets 16th-19th century texts of Oriya literature. In a 19th century text one author – then living in the Kali Yuga proper – describes corrupt behavior in the bureaucratic system established by the British. By way of this succession (first: yuga teaching, second: negative colonial conditions) an impression is created *as if* old Sanskrit texts would have prophesied a negative age of corruption which was manifested during British colonial rule. Here, Mohapatra mixes theology and history to construct an anti-British interpretation and does not refer at all to old law texts designing measures against corruption long before colonial rule. This serves his strategy of blaming colonialism while other authors do refer to and describe corrupt conditions in ancient time (Chakravarti 1998; Thakur 1979).

²¹ The editor of the text, based on a remark of Banārasīdās, claims that gratifications to officials had to be given in the way they were demanded and that corruption among officials existed (ibid.68, 113). The problem with this text is, however, that its author makes the general statement that he will not be explicit

What we can see in these texts is an awareness of what is wrong, what is corrupt, and complex measures prescribed to counter it, and there is a variety of Indian terms for the meaning of the western notion of corruption. So the question whether these phenomena in India can be understood as corruption in the common and western sense can be answered with „yes“.

India – types of corruption and recent studies

Presently, in India one can find 1) Small/petty corruption of the infrastructure type which is observable in everyday life, like bribing to get a telephone or water connection, getting a passport, reasonable treatment in a hospital in a country with free medical care, or bribing the Internal Revenue Service. In some of these fields the caste of the service-seeking person may be of influence: the higher the caste the better the service in hospitals I was told. Since everyone is familiar with these types of small corruption there is thus a *direct semantic connection*, based on experience with an understanding of the *other* type, grand corruption and its logic.

2) Grand corruption flourishes on higher levels of organization and finance, involving companies/corporations and governmental institutions. It used to be based on the so-called „licence permit raj“ in the time of planned economy before economic liberalization (Hariss-White et al. 1996) around 1990, when it was necessary for private business to acquire licences from government institutions for certain business transactions, like import and export (Pavarala 1993:25). And licences are connected with the complex of ‚black money‘ (Pendse 1989), the ‚underground economy‘. It has been estimated that at least before liberalization half of the income in India was black, or undeclared money. Another process of grand corruption is the so-called criminal-political nexus, linked with organized crime (Singh 1999:37ff.), because in recent decades criminals, instead of bribing politicians started to stand for election themselves, to become ministers in governments.

Recent studies on corruption in India are numerous, but not many have been published by anthropologists. Frequently their aim is some application: „to overcome corruption“ or „to get rid of the problem“ and they highlight various aspects and arguments – relating to definition, concept, method, whether corruption is to be seen as ‚negative‘ or as a ‚positive‘ factor, and empirical studies are presented. The discourse – by Indian and

regarding certain negative facts. So he states for instance only: „They indulged in both good and evil at Kāśī, Patna and Jaunpur for two years...“ (ibid.109), without disclosing their ‚misdeeds‘.

non-Indian scholars and in the media, has largely been of a *modernist* type in my view, i.e. it has used the framework of the common divide of right and wrong, official or legitimate, and corrupt or illegitimate, and has prescribed conventional methods of control and sanction.

Studies on various aspects can be subdivided according to type, area or dimension of corruption they deal with, and the following cases will give an impression of this variety:

Petty corruption and social structure:

- a caste of „traditional thieves“ in Rajasthan (Kanjars) who work on ‚both sides of the law‘, with the police taking bribes from them, which, according to the author, contribute to „maintain the public culture“ because they can mediate between languages (Piliavsky (2011);

Petty corruption and structures:

- police corruption, which show that those who are supposedly on the official side actually partake in corruption (Kumar 2006; Jain & Kulshrestha 2004; Verma 1999;

- Agra auto-rickshaw drivers being harrassed and exploited by police (Jain & Kulshrestha 2004);

- „Low-level“ corruption in sugar-cane transactions in Western Uttar Pradesh (Jeffrey 2002);

Economic focus:

- an emphasis on the „bazaar model of interpersonal behaviour“ focusing economic motives instead of a definition of corruption as deviant behavior which is dismissed as Eurocentric (Haiti et al. 2010:216);

Political/modernist focus:

- plead for a case study approach framing the „corruption-democracy“ linkage (Werlin 2007:359);

Humanistic/political focus:

- a focus on social, moral and political aspects highlighting the denial of rights to people by seeing corruption as „preventing the truth [democratic values of participation...] to prevail on its own right“ Ghosh (2006:39);

- the positive vs. negative valuation of corruption (economic growth, but accompanied by corruption) and the effects of grand corruption on the people (petty corruption) (Heston & Kumar 2008);

Modernist/grand corruption focus:

- India’s „dual nature“ – a dynamic nation with exploding economy and high technology, but also the (negative) effects of corruption and lacking infrastructure (MacDonald 2006:72);

Grand corruption/structural focus:

- the organization of organized crime groups in Mumbai, the financial capital, where traditions of smuggling narcotics are old (Charles 2001);

Grand corruption focus:

- a study of 431 executives and the nexus of institutions and corruption (Collins et al. 2009);
- the „Tehelka case“ of 2001, an internet website exposing corruption of high-level politicians, with the protagonists having been harrassed afterwards (Mazzarella 2006:473).

This typology may be augmented by a few and somewhat more detailed cases. The first throws some light on power relations and a cultural model which may be likened to the Big man model in some respects:

As a case of grand corruption the Bofors scandal is well-known (Singh 1999:128ff.) in which a rather discouraging trend, obedience to corrupt authoritative figures, becomes visible. It is a case of the 1980s, however, and newer trends can also be *encouraging* as we will see. I believe that, in India, obedience to „authorities“ has far-reaching effects and is a factor of power and dominance in often informal ways, and it may, in crucial cases, in this ethnographic setting be positioned *above* democratic legitimation and laws, i.e. there is a hierarchy. This general traditional principle of reverence and deference towards elders and superiors of all kinds, secular and religious, has in my view a strong potential to enhance and prolong structures of corruption. A. Jha (1989) has explicitly described cases of political devotion of this kind – towards Mahatma Gandhi, Morarji Desai, Jawaharlal Nehru and others. Devotion is a fitting term here because it points to a connection between politics and religion, it is a single emotional quality present in both and gives additional strength to the political process.

In the Bofors scandal the action of the former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi is of interest. The Swedish armaments company Bofors had sold howitzers to the Indian Army in the 1980s (Singh 1999:128ff.) and had paid about 3% as bribes to Indian citizens, possibly to Rajiv Gandhi – which was neither proven nor disproven. The Indian government had decided to buy the arms from Bofors against the will of the army which had tested several models and voted for other companies. Then the bribe became public through a Swedish radio broadcast. It would have been the responsibility of the Indian Ministry of Defense or External Affairs to deal with this case, but Gandhi decided to do it himself. The Indian ambassador in Sweden was instructed by Gandhi’s secretary to demand a *dementi* from Sweden that bribes had been paid and there were several attempts by Gandhi, using his power of office, to cover up the whole issue, which in fact amounted to attempts to demand obedience from the Swedish government, but it did not work, he

was not able to silence critical voices either in Sweden or in the Indian media. Demanding obedience would only have worked in obedience-prone cultural contexts. Obviously, Gandhi had expected old principles of loyalty, traditional obedience and the Big man principle to be still functioning, despite criticism and attempts to break through this traditional line of behavior opposed to democratic, transparent, and truth-seeking action. His moves showed how he saw his position, function and person, and what he expected others to do. Such misrecognition (Bourdieu 1992:367) is certainly not specific to India but seems to be widespread.

While the Bofors case seems to be discouraging, other cases show that change for the better is possible, there are signs of old structures crumbling, it is a trend to dissolution which I will briefly present in two ethnographic cases.

In another case researched by Akhil Gupta (2005:177-180) corrupt official middlemen have been structurally removed through the implementation of a new law. Gupta has tried to trace corrupt practices at the grassroot level, by determining the amount of money that was illegally kept by local village headmen for themselves, instead of using it for road construction. Until 1992 this money was handed down to the recipients through government officials who regularly kept part of the sum for themselves. Middlemen of various kinds are a major factor in corruption in India. A new law, the „Jawahar Employment Scheme“ (ibid. 177) determined that from now on the money had to be given directly to the village headman which left the officials without money and thus powerless. In the new situation there was embezzlement of money too, this time by the village headmen, because only few new roads were built, but at least one layer of corruption was eliminated, and the ‚dispossessed‘ middlemen were no longer courted. So even though corruption continued, but on a lower level, this shows that changes and more agency of the people are possible.

Another case happened in a village called Mallannapalle (Corbridge & Harris, cited by Fels 2008:131): Here, the "control over land and labour diminished because of new laws" (ibid.). Additionally, because of increased and improved „communication and flow of information (through a new bus route and the media)“ (ibid.) the vote banks, that is, sections of the population voting for certain candidates or parties, collapsed and people started to vote independently and individually instead of voting according to the order of the landed and financial elite. This meant an *advance* of democratic principles and a

deprivation of traditional power – as in the above case by Gupta. My point is that this decline of ‚old corrupt‘ relations seems to be positively received by the people. It is due to better communication and information, their actively entering the political sphere by acquiring procedural knowledge, supporting social movements and so on (ibid.132). According to Fels: „It is political and social consensus on how much bribe-extraction is ‚normal‘ and acceptable, which sets the limits for rent-seeking behaviour of the elite.“ (Ibid.)

Why do people still accept or endure corruption? I believe part of it is due to the long-term, or traditional experience of such conditions. They are ingrained and discourage them, make them feel powerless, helpless. In these situations only gods can help, and in them many take refuge – in the absence of a reliable, sufficient and well-functioning infrastructure.

How do people in India react when they are confronted with ideal plans for a state of affairs without corruption? They may compare affirmations of positive conditions in laws with reality around them and dismiss the laws, which are sometimes more affirmative than realistic. Will they, in effect, become apathetic, or generate resistance and measures to make things better? This differs from case to case, and situation to situation, I suppose.

The above cases and descriptions have been researched and analyzed by scholarly authors. But what about Indian non-scholarly discourses on corruption, that is, voices of other fields of the lifeworld? To include this or analyzing opinions in the media is not the aim of the present paper, but a peculiar case may be mentioned, one that has traits of erudition, theology, history, and common sense, all melted and formed into an argument. Batni, in his book *The pyramid of corruption* (2014) in the beginning uses colonial history, British ‚corruption‘ vis-à-vis India, but he then mainly focuses on old Indian (Hindu) texts to explain the phenomenon. He qualifies two types of corruption, operational and primitive (2014:13ff.), where *operational corruption* equals what is usually defined as petty and big/grand corruption, in all countries including the developing ones, and where *primitive corruption* is that of the western, former colonialist, ‚developed‘ and ‚clean‘ (according to corruption statistics) nations, exploiting other countries. His argument is that corruption of colonialist exploiters or ‚thieves‘ is of a much greater magnitude than, say, petty corruption in developing countries and even big corruption there because the economic capital involved in Batni’s primitive

(=western) corruption is much greater. Therefore, to him, primitive corruption is lawful corruption, the law itself is corrupt, „as in the case of the Indian laws enacted by the British“ (ibid.4). Next he proceeds to the old Indian social system still in use, the caste system. His explanation of caste is a voluntarist one as categorized by Dumont (1980:23f.) which was in vogue since the early days of caste explanation „almost to the present day“ (ibid.23). This understanding of caste by early and even present authors saw it as a voluntarist creation of Brahmins, with themselves at the top, to exploit other groups, castes, sections of the population, and the insight of long-standing kin relations effecting „illicit traffic“ is not new in the scholarly discourse on corruption (cf. Abraham & van Schendel 2005:5). In Batni, Brahmins do it for „personal gain“ (2014:83ff.) which uses the wording of the common definition of corruption. While Batni praises Upaniṣadic teaching in general and even Brahmins following these ideals, he condemns power-oriented Brahmins with a vengeance – if they use their status for personal or private gain, which includes „private gain“ for their group. In analyzing the system he elaborates dharmic norms of social life, especially caste endogamy and the anuloma and pratiloma principles (hypergamous and hypogamous marriages - ibid.88-91) of alliance, allowing for the „gainful“ continuation of Brahmin power, and he also interprets the *slow* institution of these rules through centuries as a vicious method, which according to Batni kept resistance below a perceptible threshold: That would have been otherwise if Brahmins had used physical violence to implement their rules (ibid.84).

For Batni, the insight into what he calls primitive corruption – to him the relevant type – calls for counter-measures in the political, social and economic (e.g., abolition of the Rupee) sphere, and mainly abolition of caste endogamy which he sees as responsible for perpetuating corrupting Brahmin power. He opts for localization: To achieve this he pleads for minimizing the power of the Indian center government and let the member states become more autonomous, choosing their own currency etc. – thereby to deprive the Brahmin elite of its privileges and terminate their rule, for instance collecting money at the top of the pyramid. To him, „disintegration is the world’s solution“ (ibid.252). The only problem it seems, is to do it and make it work, besides there is reduction in his program to change the status quo: He does not take into account a number of probably decisive elements. The measures designed by Batni may be classified as modern ones, and, as the general theoretical discussion of corruption has shown (e.g. van Schendel 2005:4), it is questionable that they will work in the present-day framework. But his case shows, and alerts to, other avenues of thinking in this field.

Conclusion: A comprehensive understanding of corruption in India

In India, rules and laws exist in abundance, for which I like to use the term ‚affirmation‘ (ideal/-ist statements), as opposed to real life, or the „existential order“ as opposed to the normative order discussed by George (1986:200), but implementation and enforcement of laws has been weak especially where money is involved (Fels 2008:133, 37-41; Oberdiek 1991:223-227). Instead, there is a type of ‚enforcement‘ effected by distress and affliction, a kind of disenchantment („Entzauberung“ – Weber 1988:114) regarding power and the state which does not, as in Weber’s case, eliminate magic but on the contrary contributes to make people take refuge in magic-like action. Due to this cleavage of real life and ideal norms corruption can prosper. A veritable tradition of non-enforcement exists, despite counter-measures created at least on the level of affirmation and occasional minor successes!

There are occasional outcries in the media or in person, or strategic action like the „Zero Rupees“ movement (<http://www.5thpillar.org>), in which people distribute fake bank notes condemning corruption if they are asked for bribes – but often such action does not have long-term effects, and it may not be very widespread.

So is there an increasing agency of the people? And has the *Right to Information Act* of 2005 (Mishra 2009) produced the desired results? This law, a fruit of several decades of citizens’ movements which aims at making government action more transparent,²² is based on the *Freedom to Information Act* in other countries, the background being the good governance idea. It also represents, in my view, a principle of empowerment situated beyond modernist ways of thinking and structures which are rather characterized by control. The *Right to Information Act* is designed to facilitate access to information of government action, to make democratic processes transparent – within a short period of time. But often, this does not happen timely, and there are cases of threat also when citizens demanded their rights. So in this instrument too, the cleavage or divide between ideal, the law, and implementation becomes visible. For instance, in order to fight corruption in the public service applicants in the government sector are tested for their anti-corrupt *values*, hoping that in this way the cultural ‚virus‘ of corruption can be averted. It would be helpful to have statistics to show how quantitatively relevant resistance movements are, but I fear, they do not exist.

²² NGOs like the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti have, since 1990, been active to help especially the rural population with the right to information, and against corruption, in public congregations discussing cases (Singh 2007:15).

Presently, the economic growth rate in India is slowing down, with a tendency of foreign investors retreating (Wagner 2013:79), and observers attribute this to a deficient modernization of the infrastructure and to bureaucratic corruption, well-known from earlier times. As the new political hope Narendra Modi is named, an entrepreneur and member of a merchant caste who has been elected as prime minister of the Hindu-nationalist *Bharatiya Janata Party* and some people think he is not corrupt (Wagner 2013:80) – while others think he is.

Regarding the three dimensions in studying corruption proposed above – theory such as reciprocity (1), structures and actors (2), and the humanistic dimension of suffering (3), I would like to point to Bourdieu's statements on understanding, in his book *The weight of the world* (1999), which is about people suffering from capitalist structures in France. To do research in this field he has dismissed common sociological methods of data gathering and proposed a kind of „submission“, or self-forgetfulness (Selbstvergessenheit) and empathy in the ethnographic situation, a „true conversion of the gaze“ (Bourdieu et al. 1997:788), which almost sounds like *Going native* (cf. Oberdiek 2007). But he kept some distance also, which means that indulging in the suffering of people cannot be an end. But showing it, exposing conditions, may be an act of the work of Enlightenment (*Aufklärungsarbeit*), making things transparent.

I do not take sides with or against the state, corruption, or any kind of other system or order, but instead try to make processes of „competing authorities“ (Abraham & van Schendel (2005:20) visible. My aim is to study an almost omnipresent way of behavior, taking advantage for oneself against dominant (official) rules by describing processes involved. Additionally, and even serving a limited (modernist) move²³ for what I would like to call, not the common, but the good of persons in relation to a community – knowing that the individual person can only ‚be well‘ in relatively painless living conditions, the absence of suffering, by consenting to some form of community-related rules. In this way I hope to provide some insight. This is connected to the issue of suffering: If there are conditions in which a people or persons claim to suffer due to corrupt practice, as they certainly do in India, processes involved can be made transparent through anthropological studies.

By including suffering I do not subscribe to the whole package of natural law or the complete catalog of human rights – as elaborated above – but only to some conditions

²³ A limited modernist move may be useful or even necessary for the time being, considering that existing structures are still modernist to a great extent.

which are also part of the *human rights*: a couple of very basic parameters like the inviolability of one's body, and opportunities to eat and live without being harrassed or impeded in ways that are experienced as seriously hampering or painful. In my view, this attitude does not require commitments or statements for or against last or axiomatic philosophical principles (which may be the work of philosophers²⁴). But we can still consider a philosophical line of argumentation by connecting corruption with principles of exchange that have been developed by thinkers like de Sade, Nietzsche, Bataille and Klossowski. The latter has based his book on money, the body and exchange, on de Sade and Freudian thought: Starting from de Sade and his ‚experimental‘ rituals with „bodies“ (Klossowski 1982) which, according to Klossowski, would express that money exchange is a perversion of libidinal energy and drives. The latter would be „true“ exchange he opines; it is an exchange of bodies, based on *phantasma* (approximately: emotional/libidinal) production, which has, in the course of time, been perverted or substituted by money, which now „represents“ the original drive. Hence the conclusion, by de Sade via Klossowski, that the abolition of the monetary exchange system would result in a „universal communication among humans“. (Ibid. text page 56). Since this line of thinking centrally focuses on the body, it might be further elaborated in the direction of anthropological studies such as Mascia-Lees (2011) or Scheper-Hughes (2002), but this cannot be done here. My own frame of engaging in corruption studies has a limited perspective: assessing the ethnographic setting and analyzing processes for theoretical aims as noted above, and in relation to the actors regarding their well-being respectively suffering. I do not position myself as some superior figure categorizing the processes authoritatively in the big clockwork mechanism of the history of ideas and thereby assuming paramount authority, or creating another metanarrative.

So suffering may be a humanistic as well as a theoretically determining frame in studying corruption. Apart from Bourdieu, Mira Fels (2008) and Veena Das (1995) in the case of the Bhopal Chemical Plant disaster (1984) have focused on suffering in studies dealing with corruption in the wider sense of the term. Veena Das (1995) has criticized that in the Bhopal case the paternal action of the state is predominant; it is coached in the voices of professionals – judges, social workers, health professionals and

²⁴ Similarly I have argued for a ‚limited‘ use of philosophical positions in anthropological work, e.g. when including positions of Derrida (Oberdiek 2013:107). I do not believe anthropologists have to subscribe to them fully.

so on. This management led „...to a professional transformation of suffering which robs the victim of her voice and distances us from the immediacy of her experience.“ (Ibid.175) It is this immediacy, action of the people, that Bourdieu has highlighted as desirable in the process of gathering data. And in my view, both, voices of the people and of professionals may be raised to alleviate suffering.

On the basis of the empirical material, present and in old texts, one can conclude that there has been corruption in India since a long time and attempts to curb it have been designed. It also seems that many people are discontent with corruption, and often I noted an undertone of disapproval²⁵, or at least it was possible to interpret their statements in a way that an existence without the necessity to bribe in everyday life and without corruption on higher levels would be definitely appreciated. So it seems it would alleviate suffering.

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²⁵ Parry notes that according to some of his informants public corruption seems to be disapproved of more than corruption in the private sector, and he sees „a growing acceptance of universalistic bureaucratic norms“ (Parry 2000:53).

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