

“JARAWA KAAMA” EATING DIRT: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION OF CULTURE OF CORRUPTION

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Introduction

Going through body of literature on corruption one may generalize that corruption is a universal phenomenon. Through examples, researchers and scholars talk of various types of corruption, such as transnational, systematic, big, petty, etc. practiced both in the developed and the developing world. From literature relating to corruption, it is evident that corrupt practices in both the developed and developing countries and finally negatively affects the developing countries than the developed countries. Many scholars have published works analyzing the phenomenon of corruption in Latin American and African countries but little attention has been paid by South Asian scholars on corruption and poverty though, corruption is one of the main obstacles to development in almost all the South Asian countries.

The poverty and the corruption are interrelated, and either corruption is the cause of poverty or vice-versa. Whichever it is, what is significant here is that when corruption spreads over a system, ‘the haves’ get the benefit out of the system while the poor are deprived of their due shares. The poor suffer more in a corrupt system, as they have to forego certain services if they cannot afford the ‘bribe price’ which is the case in majority of incidents. Thus, human rights and fundamental rights of the poor get violated when they have to pay for their basic needs. When such a situation prevails over a long period of time the deprived population loses their faith in the system. Underground political movements may try to organize these marginalized segments to fight against the system. In the political history of many poor countries, especially in South Asian countries,

including Sri Lanka, the above trend can be observed.

In Sri Lanka though, the Bribery Commission was set up in December 1994, and the commission was able to complete only few small scale investigations. However there are corruptions for instance the recent case of “sakvithi” is not detected and prevented and finally system was unable to identify and punish the culprits. This in a way indicates that administrative and political systems are directly or indirectly part of the corruption practice and or lethargic and inefficient to detect and control such practices.

This paper highlights, with few case studies, how these corrupt practices are organized and how they negatively impact on the poor. It examines further, how the poor get marginalized due to corrupt practices and interprets how this situation creates an anomie (normlessness) and an anarchy which destroys the social structure. However, this paper may not examine the macro level corruption, and focuses only corrupt practices found in the education system, especially in getting admission to ‘good’ schools. Corruption at school level was chosen for the study because it is a key socialization agent of children. A case study on the police was chosen because the legal system is the most important agent in maintaining law and order in a society.

In many cultures the colloquial terms used to denote bribing indicates it to be a ‘lowly’ act. In Sri Lanka, bribe of any form is termed as ‘jaraawa’, dirt. Offering a bribe is called ‘jaraawa deema’; asking or indicating the need for a bribe is called ‘jaraawa illeema’; engaging in corrupt practices is called ‘jaraawa keema’ (eating dirt). This particular

word used indicates that corruption is ethically unacceptable to the majority of people. The practice of offering or asking for 'jaraawa' is found in many institutions in Sri Lanka, for instance, it is found in the Airport, the Motor Traffic Department, the Police, the education system, the judicial system, the local government system, the political system, in donor funded development projects, media, etc. The nature of taking 'jaraawa' and the type of 'jaraawa' differ from place to place or system to system. All types of corruption in different systems finally affect the poor negatively.

The Department Education classifies all schools into several categories based on facilities and resources available. The student intake of the 'good' schools is limited as there is no room for further physical expansion as many are located in the heart of cities. 'Good' schools have great many facilities, equipment and human resources. The passing rate of the competitive university entrance examination is high in these schools. Being old boys/girls at these schools carries considerable clout when applying for a job. It can be a determinant factor in a person's future. There is a scholarship program to provide an opportunity for the best students of the country to enter to a 'good' school. Only very few students who get high marks get admissions to 'good' schools.

When admitting a child to a 'good' school, there are two main admission requirements.¹ One is the distance from the school to the place of residence. Parents have to produce documents to prove that they live in close proximity to the school concerned. The important documents required are a certificate from the village administrative head, electricity bills, copies of taxes paid to municipalities, water bills, deeds of the land

they live in, etc. The other admission requirement is the affordability to contribute to the School Development Fund (SDF). Principals manage the SDF and the size of the contribution is determined by the principals depending on several factors. However, those parents who can contribute more to the SDF have higher chance of entering their children to a 'good' school. Parents can contribute to SDF by cash or kind or both. However, it is now no longer a secret that SDF is the legitimate way of asking 'jaraawa'. This paper provides case studies of parents who had to offer 'jaraawa' to admit their children to so-called 'good' schools.

Objectives of the paper

The main objective of this paper is to study the culture of corruption from an anthropological viewpoint. The paper examines how a social web is damaged by corruption, and how its negative consequences affects the powerless people.

Methodology

The findings of this paper are entirely based on information gathered through anthropological data collection techniques and interpretations. Key informant's interviews were held with respondents who have had first hand experiences on corrupted practices.

¹ . When this study was done the Principals had the authority to admit students to their schools.