



**Corruption, Governance
and
International Cooperation**

Essays and Impressions on Nepal and South Asia

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ABOUT THE BOOK

One bright early November morning in the year Nineteen Ninety-two, something happened in my life that has led, among other things, to the publication of this small volume. That morning I received an unexpected call from a visitor staying at a modest hotel in Thamel. He wanted to talk with me about his mission to put together a global organisation to see if something could be done about curbing corruption that was impeding development everywhere. I told him I was interested in the issue, but I did not have much time to spare that day because I was to leave for Colombo in a few hours. He then enquired what time my plane was to leave so that he could come to the airport and see me before I flew off. His pleasant persistence left me with no choice but to invite him to come to my house for a hurried chat. He came on a bicycle; how he located my house as quickly as he did in the labyrinth that is Kathmandu I will never know.

Peter Eigen, the founding president of Transparency International, is nearly a household name now at least in the circles initiated to anti-corruption activism and discourses around the world. But I had not met, seen or heard of the man before that day. His years of service at the World Bank had to do mainly with managing the African programmes far removed from my responsibilities when I was a public official or, later, a development consultant/activist in Nepal. And, in fact, as I was to learn later the idea of Transparency International germinated in Nairobi where Peter was located as the regional head of the Bank's East African programme. Anyway, I am glad we had that meeting in Kathmandu and, as they say, the rest is history as far as my humble association with the Transparency International (TI) is concerned. I could not join the launching of TI at Villa Borsig in Berlin in May 1993 because of my late-lamented mother's illness. The founders even without my affiliation with TI. I should like to believe that they are only a part of my continuing engagement in studies and reflections on development and democracy at least since the early 1980s. Some of the papers included here, in fact, originated in contexts, which have little to do with my association with TI. It is another matter that I always take the opportunity to project the mission and the work of the organisation in forums I attend, unless the subject at hand is radically different. Be that as it may, the point is that I would not have the will or perhaps even the conviction to deploy myself for the purpose that I now feel committed to without the impetus of my involvement with TI.

The items in the collection are a disparate lot. Some were written as opinion pieces for electronic debate and similar forums; others constitute informal presentations at the meetings and workshops of Transparency International. Still some others were written more formally as seminar papers for forums not directly related to the anti-corruption movement. Many have been published previously, in full or in part. I have not specifically tried to "update" any one of them. Since all papers emphasise principles, values and attitudes rather than facts, figures or events, such updating was not considered necessary or desirable. However, none of the items presented in the collection are in exactly the form they were originally written in. I have at least editorially touched on all of them, and in some cases more substantively for the purpose of the present publication. I even dare to hope that, because of this effort, there is some coherence and sequence among chapters entitling the product to be called a book.

Again, because the emphasis is on values and attitudes, whether we are dealing with governance or corruption in particular, an idea or a thought expressed in one essay may surface in another which might make the reading a bit tedious at times. My justification for leaving them as they are is that this approach helps to stress the points I wish to make by nuancing them properly to fit the contexts I navigate through.

A discourse on corruption geared to contributing to the movement against it has to touch the hearts of the people in addition to their heads. By "the people" I mean members of the chattering and the ruling classes of which I myself may be a sinning member whose conscience may benefit from a little massaging. Guided as the presentation is by such belief and purpose, the book may naturally fall

short in meeting the expectations of analysts and social scientists who are used to better-structured works on subjects of their interests. However, the collection hopefully has its value for other purposes — the purpose of opinion building and contributing to a sufficiently honest and pro-active debate on the issue.

Let me also clarify that this volume is not about naming and shaming of anybody. First, not all the essays included here are about corruption *per se*. And, when they are, they are not concerned about corruption cases as such or about scandals or scams that can be a more titillating read for some. If there is any shaming at all, it may be there only in terms of the ideas and impressions that should shame us all in Nepal collectively.

My generation and perhaps a whole lot of other people who are younger and older have little to show for our efforts as far as the country is concerned for all our professional engagements, civil society activism or moral posturing. One may have to define corruption pretty narrowly if any one of us in the social and economic class I have in mind wishes to claim that unethical if not illegal acts have never been their indulgence. To a degree, passions and interests inimical to the country's long-term good have guided us all, and now that the consequences are coming home to roost we must face them squarely and honestly.

What I also need to clarify here is that, despite my claims of not naming or shaming anybody, the readers may find my comments and observations rather harsh and, perhaps, judgmental at times. My friends and critics know the shortcomings in my style better than I do, perhaps. But then they will again see that this is done either with malice towards none or with malice towards one and all. It has to be this way when authors and analysts after pouring out all their wisdom on paper find no choice but to realise that they too have no direct, doable and disinterested solutions to the problems the nation faces. Better to admit it and do the best, and hope, than to fight the unfightable.

I get particularly disturbed these days thinking if Kahlil Gibran, the Sufi poet, had people like me in mind when in the answer to the Almitra's query about the Laws he says in his *The Prophet*:

... what of those
... to whom life is a rock , and the law a chisel with which they would carve it in their own
likeness?
What of the cripple who hates dancers?
What of the ox who loves his yoke and deems the elk and deer of the forest stray and vagrant
things?
What of the old serpent who cannot shed his skin and calls others naked and shameless?
And of him who comes early to the wedding-feast, and when over-fed and tired goes his way saying
that all feasts are violation and all feasters law-breakers?

The last couplet is especially poignant in our context. Could the poet be anticipating or imagining about those of us who served the *Panchayat* regime, had a good time and now are pointing accusing fingers at others who came late to the “wedding-feast”? Or could he be thinking of some office-bearers at Transparency International who insist that all its members should be volunteers, after they themselves had their earnings and lived a good life? Amidst all the anxiety and frustrations engulfing us today, why not, therefore, try to believe that the bad and the ugly are as anxious to metamorphose into something beautiful and valuable as we all wish to? They need help like we all do. In a way that is what the objective of good governance is all about — finding the best in us and letting them grow so that they can drown the worst in us.

For this to happen, we have to understand well the true meaning of the term, accountability. Accountability is not about accusing others; it is about everyone with positions of responsibility in the society, economy or politics being accountable to oneself, that is to one's urge for self-respect and self-esteem. Accountability in a more functional sense can flow only from such sublime source. The casting of the corruption issue in the broader canvas of governance and transparency as attempted in the following pages hopefully situates the question of accountability appropriately.

One cannot be a participant in anti-corruption engagements and at the same time not be optimistic. But it is a difficult challenge. At this time, I am forcing myself to believe that the general environment may now be propitious for anti-corruption work in Nepal from at least one point of view. The debate is getting ripe and even focused at times. Not only the ordinary people but the politicians also are becoming aware of the cost of corruption to them and to the society. Some public institutions that have been stagnating are now showing signs of some movement, notwithstanding the disastrous experiences the nation has had to go through at the same time.

The difficulties arise mainly from the condition where the political leaders have not been able to come to terms with the political culture expected of them in a democracy. A further lacuna is that academicians and other presumably better informed actors in the civil society have also not been able to come up with a workable formula that a politician can use to succeed in politics and also remain totally honest. Our job is to help them, not merely malign them.

In essence, I have to go back to Kahlil Gibran once again. I end my prefatorial remarks with yet another gem from him.

Oftentimes have I heard you speak of one who commits a wrong as though he were not
 one of you, but a stranger unto you and an intruder upon your world.

But I say that even as the holy and the righteous cannot rise beyond the highest which is
 in each one of you,

So the wicked and the weak cannot fall lower than the lowest which is in you also.

And as a single leaf turns not yellow but with the silent knowledge of the whole tree,

So the wrong-doer cannot do wrong without the hidden will of you all.

Like a procession you walk together towards your god-self.

You are the way and the wayfarers.

And when one of you falls down he falls for those behind him, a caution against the
 stumbling stone.

Ay, and he falls for those ahead of him, who though faster and surer of foot, yet removed not the stumbling
 stone.