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Shalini Bharti
Department of Political Science, Shambu Dyal (PG) College, Ghaziabad, Affiliated to CCS University Meerut, Uttar Pradesh, India

Rochna Mittal
Department of Political Science, Shambu Dyal (PG) College, Ghaziabad, Affiliated to CCS University Meerut, Uttar Pradesh, India

Corresponding Author:
Shalini Bharti
Department of Political Science, Shambu Dyal (PG) College, Ghaziabad, Affiliated to CCS University Meerut, Uttar Pradesh, India

The history of corruption in India

Shalini Bharti and Rochna Mittal

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Abstract
This manuscript traces the historical evolution of corruption in India, from the Vedic age to the post-liberalization era in India. Corruption is an inbuilt system in the human mind, and it has persisted since civilization started. Corruption was accursed in texts like the Rigveda as a societal evil linked to poverty and deprivation. Though Kautilya's Arthashastra has no mention of the word "corruption," it is the most comprehensive and detailed text about various forms of corrupt official practices, detailing 40 types of embezzlement and proposing stringent penalties for each of them. Medieval India, under the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal Empire, struggled with corrupt revenue systems, aggravated by decentralized governance and Jagirdari abuses. The colonial era under the British Raj institutionalized corruption through rigid administrative practices crafted especially to exploit the wealth of India and lay the foundation for systemic inequalities. Post-independence, the License Raj fostered bureaucratic corruption. Post-1991 liberalization, crony capitalism became apparent. India is still struggling to counter this system, which is deeply rooted in politics, society, and administration in various forms.

Keywords: Vedic period, Medieval India, corruption, license raj, embezzlement

Introduction
Corruption disturbs and distorts the democratic setup of a country and undermines the rule of law. Official corruption, which becomes systematic, especially threatens the human rights of people across the world. It breaks the trust of citizens and demolishes bureaucracy over time. Corruption is the reason for poverty, terrorism, slow growth, and human rights violations. Corruption knows no borders. Though some nation-states are more corrupt than others, no nation-state is free from corruption. Petty corruption is a common problem in all countries. Systematic corruption is more common in underdeveloped and developing nations. Further, it is a threat to the political and economic stability of all nations. Most of these nations have a history of colonization. These former colonies were left stranded by their colonial masters to struggle and adjust to the brand-new bureaucratic system that was imposed upon them by those who were catering to their self-interest through the system. Bureaucracy was not established to cater to the needs of people, nor was it a system of welfare. The bureaucracy was there to serve the colonial masters and ease their work while ruling and running the country. The whole system was highly centralized and self-serving.
Many scholars trace the roots of corruption back to the British raj period. Official Secret Act 1923 and Infamous license permit raj are often blamed for causing mass corruption in India. But even before that there are many illustrations of corrupt activities in geographical borders of India. Though Corruption is normal human behavior but it becomes abnormal when it is practiced without the fear of consequences.

Ancient India (Geographical extent)
The word 'India' is derived from the name of the Indus River, which is also called the river Sindhu. The Chinese called India shin-tuh or Sindhu. In the Rigveda, it is referred to as 'sapta sindhavas' or 'the seven rivers'. In Buddhist literature, it is termed as 'Jambudvipa'. Bharatvarsa was one of nine varsas or states comprising the nine main divisions of Jambudvipa. Thus, it is not the area covering present-day geographical India. According to some scholars, the furthest limit of India was the Kopes, i.e., the river Kabul in the west. Although Sri Lanka or Ceylon was culturally and geographically connected to India, it was not a part of India properly [1].

Vedic period (c. 1500-500 BCE)

The Vedic Age was characterized by a tribal, pastoral society with rudimentary governance centered around tribal chiefs ("Rajan") and assemblies ("Sabha" and "Samiti"). Corruption was less institutionalized due to the absence of complex bureaucracies, but appeared in the form of favoritism and misuse of communal resources. The "Rigveda" (c. 1500-1200 BCE), one of the earliest Vedic texts, mentions gifts ("Dana") offered to priests and chiefs to secure favor, suggesting early forms of bribery. For instance, "Rigveda" 1.125.1 describes lavish gifts to priests for blessings, hinting at transactional relationships [2]. Favoritism in resource distribution marginalized lower tribal groups, fostering social inequalities.

Corruption is considered an evil in the Vedas. Rigveda specifically contains many hymns concerning corruption in society (though no mention of word is recorded) and also suggestions for removing it from society. Elimination of corruption by individuals practicing various professions is considered necessary for good governance and a society free from evil [3]. When it is used within the limits of need, then it is considered a virtue, and when it is used exploitatively and excessively then it becomes a sin. Corruption creeps into a society when individuals start ignoring the divine laws. These eternal laws of nature must always be followed and protected [4].

Rig Veda states that the thieves of God (bribe givers/takers) become insensitive to hydra-headed corruption and resort to extravagant worship and donations/gift culture to gain social recognition. In other words, people involved in bribery, both bribe givers and bribe takers, are equally responsible for their sins. These people are overly indulged in temporary pleasures and are ignorant of the evil of corruption. Corrupt people are motivated by materialistic things and flashy lives. To attain a definite and spectacular social status, they are willing to deviate from the path of truth [5]. Rig Veda also states that "when even one human being dies of starvation, it is a signal that corruption has crept into society" [6]. This particular statement leads to the conclusion that corruption leads to deprivation in a society. Poverty, starvation, and deprivation are the symptoms of a corrupted system.

Sama Veda (179 and 913) again characterize Corruption as hydra-headed, meaning having nine heads (nine variations), and it corrupts human body through five sense organs. Rigveda also mentions 99 vritras or powers of evil in 1-84-13. It describes in 1-104-3 that receiving or demanding bribes for money belonging to the state is a misappropriation of government money or public funds. Anyone who take bribes or force others to give them bribe are thieves of God and they get rebirth in filthy womb; it is also confirmed even in Bhagavad-Gita. Rigveda (3-34-6) and Yajur Veda 30-22 advise that corrupt people should not be permitted to live with common civilians (people following Chatvar Varnasharam) because they follow four divine professions. Yajurveda (30-19) and Rigveda (5-61-8) strictly dictate that those persons who praise and justify corruption are also corrupt and one should stay away from them. Rigveda (1-42-4) even mentions that one should stay away from teachers or Gurus (preceptors) who take donations/charity because it is also considered as a form of bribe [7].

The Later Vedic period saw the emergence of territorial kingdoms and a more structured administration, with taxation and land grants becoming common. Corruption manifested as misappropriation of taxes and abuse of power by local officials. The "Atharvaveda" (c. 1000 BCE) refers to dishonest officials ("dasyus") who exploit subjects through excessive taxation [8]. The "Shatapatha Brahmana" (c. 800 BCE) critiques priests demanding excessive ritual fees, indicating early bureaucratic corruption. The "Aitareya Brahmana" (c. 800 BCE) describes a king withholding tribute from vassals, suggesting embezzlement in royal treasuries [9]. Corruption in tax collection burdened agrarian communities, particularly non-Kshatriya groups, leading to economic disparities.

Mauryan Empire (c. 321-185 BCE)

The Mauryan Empire, under rulers like Chandragupta Maurya and Ashoka, developed a centralized bureaucracy with extensive taxation, trade regulation, and public works. This complexity fostered corruption, which Kautilya addressed in his seminal text, "Arthashastra". Kautilya's "Arthashastra" (c. 300 BCE) is a critical source, detailing 40 types of embezzlement ("sanchara") by officials, including bribery, tax evasion, and falsifying accounts. Book 2, Chapter 8, lists penalties for corrupt officials, such as fines or exile [10]. Kautilya notes, "Just as fish moving underwater cannot be detected, so too officials misappropriating revenue are hard to catch" ("Arthashastra" 2.9). The "Arthashastra" describes corrupt "Adhyakshas" (superintendents) inflating project costs, such as in irrigation works, to siphon funds. Kautilya's spies ("Gudhapurushas") were deployed to detect such malpractices. The Mauryan tax system, collecting 25-33% of agricultural produce, was prone to leakage, with estimates suggesting 10-15% misappropriation by local officials [11]. Corruption undermined public welfare projects, disproportionately affecting lower castes and rural communities reliant on state infrastructure.

Temptation and greed are two very common driving forces behind the corrupt behavior of people. Kautilya has called the nature of men 'fickle minded'. The Arthasastra advises that the honesty of the judges should be tested from time to time. Kautilya in his Arthasastra has written a chapter titled "Detection of what is embezzled by government servants out of state revenue" which "reads like a modern official report on modes of corruption and corresponding punishments" [12]. He has outlined approximately forty methods of embezzlement, including: recording earlier collections as later ones; logging later collections as earlier; failing to record what should be collected; not collecting what is due; presenting difficult-to-collect items as collected; showing collected amounts as uncollected; correctly recording collected amounts; entering partially collected amounts as fully collected; recording fully collected amounts as partially collected; entering collected items as a different type; attributing collections to incorrect sources; not paying what is owed; paying what is not owed; delaying payments; making untimely payments; exaggerating small gifts as large; downplaying large gifts as small; recording gifted items as a different type; listing a different recipient than the actual one; removing items from the treasury while showing uncredited items as credited; recording unpaid raw materials as paid and vice versa; breaking down aggregates into parts or combining single items into aggregates; exchanging high-value goods for low-value ones or vice versa; inflating commodity prices; lowering commodity prices; increasing the number of

nights; decreasing the number of nights; misaligning the year with its months, misaligning the month with its days, inconsistencies in personally supervised transactions, misrepresenting income sources; discrepancies in charitable giving; inaccuracies in reporting completed work, inconsistencies in handling fixed items, misrepresenting commodities using false weights and measures, deceiving in item counts, and employing inaccurate cubic measures like Bhajana [12]. Ashoka's dharmic state closely on the heels of Kautilya's times, must have had the minimum of corruption [13].

Kautilya in his Arthshastra talked about the misappropriation of funds by the officials while constructing the fort and also suggested their punishment according to the harm inflicted by them or the embezzlement of funds or gems misappropriated by them. There are numerous illustrations of possible embezzlement and willful misappropriation of treasury by the royal officials in Kautilya's Arthshastra. The punishments ranged from mild like fines and compensation to severe torture and the death penalty. Ill-intention was possible in all departments by officers, clerks, servants, guards, and even chamberlain.

According to Kautilya any willful deviation from the prescribed or permitted function by an official is considered punishable as it is against the king's order. So, we may conclude that his definition of corruption included any act that goes against the order of the king and causes him harm in any way whether financial or physical. As he has written in his book Arthshastra: "When an officer (Káranika) does not follow the king's order, or renders the receipts and expenditure otherwise than prescribed, he shall be punished with the first amercement. Any clerk who deviates from the prescribed form of writing accounts and enters fake or unknown record (punaruktam) shall be fined 12 panas" [10].

Corruption by collectors causes the loss in revenue. The punishment of theft should be imposed upon those officials who lie. Kautilya emphasized greatly the treasury of a kingdom as all undertakings depend upon economic strength. Kautilya has listed eight kinds of offensive acts named as given in Table 1.

Table 1: Eight kinds of offensive acts as listed in Kautilya's Arthashastra

S. No.	Name of the offensive act
1	Obstruction (Pratibandha)
2	Loan (Prayóga)
3	Trading (Vyavahára)
4	Fabrication of accounts (Avastára)
5	Causing the loss of revenue (Parihápana)
6	Self-enjoyment (Upabhóga)
7	Barter (Parivartana)
8	Defalcation (Apahára)

In simple terms, misuse of government funds, fabrication in revenue collection, deviation in expected expenditure (more or less), misrepresentation of the treasury, and enjoyment of the king's property are considered corrupt acts. Kautilya has further explained the forty ways of embezzlement. Deliberately rigging treasury, inconsistency in payments, charity, and gifts, misrepresentation of the source of income, falsehood in weight and measures, and deception are several of the malfeasances.

Kautilya termed the human mind as naturally fickle and repeatedly claimed that embezzlement and corruption at the hands of officials are nearly impossible to avoid. As in the words of Kautilya. "Just as it is impossible not to taste the honey or the poison that finds itself at the tip of the tongue, so it is impossible for a government servant not to eat up, at least, a bit of the king's revenue. Just as fish moving underwater cannot possibly be found out either as drinking or not drinking water, so government servants employed in the government work cannot be found out (while) taking money (for themselves)" [10]. Government servants like other beings are humans and possess the same human nature of greed and selfishness. It is obvious to fall prey when given exposure to money. These statements of Kautilya clearly show that he was not an idealist but a realist. Instead of covering up the problem or denying the very basic human nature, he admitted to the fact that a bureaucracy no matter how highly classified it is; prone to corruption. So, it is important to find ways to curb such practices [14]. Ashoka's Rock Edicts (c. 250 BCE) urge officials to act justly, indirectly acknowledging corruption [15].

Post-Mauryan and Gupta Period (c. 185 BCE-550 CE)

The post-Mauryan period saw fragmented kingdoms (e.g., Shungas, Satavahanas), followed by the Gupta Empire's golden age. Decentralized governance increased opportunities for corruption, particularly in land grants and judicial systems. The "Kathasaritsagara" (c. 5th century CE), a collection of tales, narrates stories of corrupt tax collectors ("Karadhikari") extorting merchants, reflecting Gupta-era practices [16]. Gupta inscriptions, like the Allahabad Pillar Inscription (c. 375 CE), mention land grants to Brahmins, some secured through bribes, suggesting elite favoritism [17]. Corruption in land administration marginalized non-elite groups, reinforcing caste hierarchies and economic exclusion.

Medieval India

Delhi Sultanate (1206-1526 CE)

The Delhi Sultanate (1206-1526) and Mughal Empire (1526-1857) developed sophisticated bureaucracies with jagirdari (land revenue) systems, which were prone to corruption. The Mughal period, culminating with Bahadur Shah Zafar saw widespread administrative malpractices.

Khilji

Corruption was widely spread during Khilji rule in India especially in Department of revenue and drastic measures were adopted by Allauddin Khilji to check corruption. He realized that the low salaries of the officials tempted them to accept and even extort bribes. To deal with it, he increased their salaries so that they could lead a comfortable life. Despite implementing this measure, corruption persisted among lower officials, leading the Sultan to harshly punish those convicted of corrupt practices. The punitive measures taken by Allauddin had an advantageous effect on nepotism [18]. During the reign of Alauddin Khalji (1296-1316), officials were known to hoard goods or manipulate market prices for personal gain, despite the sultan's strict price control policies. The Siyasatnama by Nizam al-Mulk, a Persian administrative manual influential in the Sultanate, warns against officials who misappropriate public funds, indicating the prevalence of such practices [19]. Alauddin Khalji's market reforms (c. 1300) aimed to curb price manipulation by corrupt officials but Humera Naz's article in the Journal of History and Social Sciences argues that

these reforms were only partially effective, as officials found ways to circumvent regulations after Alauddin's death [20].

Tuglaq

Ibn Battuta's "Rihla" (c. 1355) describes corrupt governors ("Walis") in the Tughlaq administration extorting merchants through illegal taxes [21]. The "Tarikh-i-Firoz Shahi" by Ziauddin Barani (c. 1357) notes Firoz Shah Tughlaq's anti-corruption measures, including audits to prevent revenue misappropriation [22]. Ziya al-Din Barani, in Tarikh-i-Firoz Shahi, describes how officials under the Delhi Sultanate demanded bribes from petitioners seeking redressal of grievances. Even access to the sultan's court often required payments to intermediaries. For instance, Barani notes that "fariyadis" (petitioners) had to bribe bureaucrats to present their cases, with officials extracting a share of any monetary awards granted by the sultan [22].

Mohammad bin Tughluq enacted administrative reforms to improve governance and revenue collection. He introduced the "Daag" system, a method of agricultural measurement to more efficiently assess and tax farmland. He also reorganized the empire into provinces called "diwans", each governed by a provincial governor or "wazir", to enhance administrative efficiency. These administrative reforms intended to improve governance by increasing revenue collection, strengthen the bureaucratic system, and ensure effective management. The implementation of these policies struggled due to deep-rooted corruption, mismanagement, and the inability to effectively monitor and control the vast empire [23].

Tughluq's administrative measures including expanding state oversight of agricultural lands and establishing an extensive spy network were designed to strengthen authority and enhance governance. These measures often resulted in corruption, exploitation, and resistance from local rulers and nobles [24]. K.S. Lal, in Studies in Medieval Indian History, argues that the delegation of authority to local governors (amirs and muqtis) created opportunities for rent-seeking, as these officials operated with significant autonomy [25].

Mughal Empire (1526-1857 CE)

Under the early Mughals, particularly Akbar (1556-1605), the mansabdari system aimed to streamline administration and reduce corruption by tying ranks to specific duties and salaries. However, as historian Athar Ali notes in The Mughal Nobility under Aurangzeb, the system's dependence on personal loyalty led to favoritism and inefficiencies, perpetuating corrupt practices [26].

The "Akbarnama" by Abul Fazl (c. 1590) praises Akbar's anti-corruption reforms, such as centralizing revenue collection to curb jagirdar abuses [27]. However, the "Ain-i-Akbari" (c. 1590) acknowledges persistent bribery among "mansabdars" (officials) [28]. During the 18th-century decline under Aurangzeb, widespread corruption prevailed, as jagirdars withheld 20-30% of revenue, undermining the empire's stability [29]. The "Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri" by Jahangir (c. 1620) admits to officials accepting bribes for judicial favors [30]. By the 1750s, Mughal revenue collection efficiency dropped to 60% due to corrupt intermediaries, contributing to fiscal collapse [31]. Under Bahadur Shah Zafar (1837-1857), administrative corruption exacerbated the economic decline. The "Awadh Gazetteer" (1877) notes that corrupt "amils" (tax collectors) in Awadh extorted peasants, fueling discontent before the 1857 Revolt [32].

Colonial Era (1858-1947): Foundations of Systemic Corruption

Mughal ruler Aurangzeb issued a "firman" in 1680 which was obtained through a bribe of 50,000 rupees [33]. Company obtained many other orders and firmans in later years through same practice. Company abused local practices by deliberately misreading Mughal orders and doing fraudulent activities. This point is further stenghtened by a contemporary historian who noted that, the 1717 firman was not intended as a "concession" according to Mughal norms as claimed by the Company or its officials. Instead, it was intended to grant "specific privileges" only for a limited period, subject to periodic approval [34]. These claims build up the notion that illegitimate commercial activities in India was not due to defective legal orders in Mughal era instead it was the Company that is responsible for the initiation all those corrupt practices. Company sympathiser is more likely to describe bribery as something demanded willfully by local rulers as an unfair cost of 'purchasing' firmans.

W.H. Moreland who was a historian and a civil servant in British India has documented in a text of 1920 that, "Bribery was almost universal in India at this time." Moreland has described the experience of a French traveler Jean de Thévenot, who in his journey of 1666-67 was struck by "the insolence of the tax collectors acting in the name of the lords," by a king who conferred land "to the highest bidder, or to his favorites," and by the "extraordinary exactions" which nobles made on their grants [35]. By the end of the 17th century, the Company's method of doing business in India was transforming in ways that we consider corrupt. For example, a firman granted by Aurangzeb in 1680 "under intense pressure and with a Rs. 50,000 bribe"[36]. In conjunction with official orders like firmans, they also incorporate the Company's "entry into local customs and practices and working with local traders" as other sources of their growing authority. They claim that it also involves "selling exemptions" to locals for "reciprocal privileges" [36]. Company employees increasingly accumulated "extraordinary fortunes simply by taking bribes" from rivaling locals. These "bribes" were referred to by Company officials as "presents" [37]. It was held that "presents were permissible" if "given voluntarily for genuine interests" and did not harm Company interests [37]. Dastaks detailing the quantity and quality of goods eligible for duty-free passage were issued exclusively to two senior Company officers in 1682. Company employees started giving them to locals in "an infinite manner," thereby "defrauding the Mughal authority of its proper revenues" [38]. As the eighteenth century progressed, reports indicate that the misuse of dastaks grew increasingly severe.

Post-independence, India adopted a socialist model with heavy state control, leading to the License Raj-a system of bureaucratic permits fostering corruption. Politicians and bureaucrats exploited licensing for personal gain, creating monopolies and black markets. The 1964 Mundhra Scandal, involving fraudulent investments by the Life Insurance Corporation, cost the state ₹1.25 crore (equivalent to ₹100 crore in 2023) and exposed political collusion [39]. By the 1980s, India's black economy was estimated at 20-25% of GDP, fueled by corrupt licensing practices [40]. The 1974-1975 Nagarwala Scandal saw ₹60 lakh embezzled from the

State Bank of India through forged documents, highlighting banking sector vulnerabilities. Emergency Period (1975-1977): Under Indira Gandhi, the government suspended civil liberties, arresting over 140,000 people without trial [41]. Corrupt officials abused powers under the Maintenance of Internal Security Act (MISA), targeting political opponents and minorities. Custodial deaths rose, with 1,337 reported between 1979 and 1989 [42]. The 1984 Bhagalpur Blinding Case, where police blinded 31 under trials, was abetted by corrupt judicial inaction. Corruption in public schemes like the Food Corporation of India led to food grain leakages, estimated at 30% in the 1980s, depriving SCs and STs of food security [43]. Corrupt land acquisitions for projects like the Narmada Dam displaced 50,000 Adivasis by 1990, violating their property rights [44]. The 1984 Anti-Sikh Riots, killing 2,800 Sikhs, were exacerbated by police complicity and corrupt investigations, denying justice [45].

The 1991 economic reforms dismantled the License Raj, but corruption persisted in new forms, driven by crony capitalism and public-private collusion. Mega-scams marked this period, diverting public resources and undermining governance. The 2008 2G Spectrum Scam, involving corrupt telecom license allocations, cost the exchequer ₹1.76 lakh crore [46]. The 2010 Commonwealth Games Scandal saw ₹70,000 crore misappropriated through inflated contracts [47]. The 2009 Satyam Scandal, where corporate fraud inflated profits by ₹7,136 crore, exposed regulatory failures and political patronage.

Post-Liberalization Era (1991-Present): Crony Capitalism

The 1991 reforms dismantled the License Raj but developed crony capitalism. The 2008 2G Spectrum Scam cost ₹1.76 lakh crore [46], the 2010 Commonwealth Games Scandal misappropriated ₹70,000 crore [47], and the 2009 Satyam Scandal inflated profits by ₹7,136 crore. Special Economic Zone land acquisitions displaced 1.4 million, primarily Adivasis and Dalits [48]. Judicial delays, with 31 million pending cases, and 1,224 custodial deaths (2005-2010) reflected systemic issues [49]. The National Rural Health Mission scam embezzled ₹10,000 crore, affecting 40 million [50]. This selfish economic system gave unfair advantage to the capitalists and widened the gap between rich and poor. The unlimited Competition in this capitalist economic has challenged the idea of welfare state. The market is open for all players and for the fittest to survive, it is necessary to devour other small fishes. The problem is not only that it devours other small fishes but it corrupts the water also.

Conclusion

Corruption evolved from informal favoritism in the Vedic Age to sophisticated embezzlement in the Mughal Empire, driven by increasing administrative complexity. Kautilya's "Arthashastra" stands out as a pioneering text, offering systematic anti-corruption strategies, many of which are still relevant.

Corruption not only led to the downfall of Mughal Empire but also became one of the reasons of emergence of colonial rule in India. British raj set the stage for colonial exploitation, administrative corruption and systemic inequalities in a very organized manner. The License Raj aggravated bureaucratic corruption and Red-Tapism in India. As we have already understood from the historical viewpoint that corruption has been a social, political and psychological problem since ages, we must also find ways to defeat it in all its forms and various manners. In present times, it is necessary to increase transparency, use advanced methods, encourage responsible system and create mass awareness to limit corrupt activities of individuals, institutions and state.

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