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Deconstructing Corruption: From Psycho-Ethical Perspective of Yoga Philosophy

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Abstract: Corruption can be defined as a multidimensional social and ethical problem which impacts upon political, judicial, education, health and other crucial spheres of life. Although the measures taken in order to control the problem of corruption are mostly legal, administrative and institutional, its psychological and ethical aspects need to be analyzed. In this paper, corruption is considered from the perspective of Yoga philosophy, in terms of such concepts as citta-vṛtti, kleśas, Yama and Niyama. The way in which mental disturbance, attachment, greed and lack of self-discipline might lead to unethical behavior will be studied. Further, the principles of ethics provided by Patañjali and their applicability to formation of individual moral responsibility will be examined. The study is based on qualitative, conceptual and philosophical approach and includes conceptual and critical analysis. It is argued that, even though the measures used in controlling the phenomenon of corruption are institutional, ethical transformation of individuals provides another important angle. The principles of Yoga philosophy, especially Ahimsā, Satya, Asteya, Brahmacharya, Aparigraha and the five Niyamas allow restraining, being truthful, contented, disciplined and responsible. Therefore, Yoga can be treated as philosophy in action which deals with the ethical fundamentals of human behavior.

Introduction

Corruption continues to pose a major threat to modern society. Corruption demeans institutions, undermines the principles of justice and undermines service delivery. With regard to these considerations, it becomes important that ethical public servants are developed. Mission Karmayogi is one such flagship mission which aims to develop competencies of civil servants and ensure that their capacities are aligned to the country's priorities and Indian ethos. This is where the concept of Karma Yoga becomes highly relevant. A Karma Yogi discharges his/her duties without being affected by the consequences of his actions and adheres to the Dharma. On the other hand, a corrupt public servant is one who indulges in various practices including bribery, embezzlement, extortion, rent seeking, nepotism and fraud. The consequences can be observed in inadequate health and educational infrastructure and in weakened judicial, political, economic and social systems.

Corruption, however, cannot be understood only as an institutional or legal problem. It also has political, legal, demographic, economic, social and psychological dimensions. The decision to misuse entrusted authority for personal benefit involves an ethical choice at the level of the individual.

This raises an important philosophical question: **How can the ancient Indian philosophical principles of Yoga contribute to understanding and addressing the problem of corruption?**

Research Methodology

The current study follows a qualitative and conceptual research method. Conceptual analysis and criticism are applied to address the issue of corruption using the ethical philosophy of Yoga. As the study is philosophical, rather than empirical, it does not make use of any primary empirical data or statistical analysis. Analysis of central concepts of the Yoga philosophy proposed by Patañjali is undertaken to reveal their possible implications for modern social and ethical problems. Discourse, analytical, comparative and critical methods are used to comprehend the relation between the psychological aspects of human behavior and ethics.

Understanding the Concept of Corruption:

- **Definitions of Corruption**

The Oxford English Dictionary describes corruption through dimensions including physical decay or contamination, moral degeneration and dishonest practices such as fraud and bribery. The World Bank defines corruption as the “abuse of public office for private gain,” while Transparency International describes it as the “abuse of entrusted power for private gain.” Ian Senior further explains corruption in terms of a covert favour or benefit given to influence an action by a person having authority.

These definitions demonstrate that corruption involves the misuse of authority, trust or responsibility for personal or private benefit. It is therefore not merely a violation of rules but also a deviation from ethical responsibility.

- **Corruption as an Ethical and Psychological Problem**

A person engaging in corruption chooses personal benefit over the duty entrusted to them. Such behaviour may be influenced by greed, attachment, desire, social conditioning and the perception that corrupt practices are acceptable or commonly practised.

Consequently, addressing corruption requires more than external punishment. Legal and institutional safeguards are essential, but ethical development may also play a significant role in preventing an individual from choosing an unethical course of action. It is at this point that the psychological and ethical dimensions of Yoga philosophy become relevant.

Corruption and *Cittavṛtti*

- ***Citta* and the Modifications of Mind**

Patañjali defines Yoga through the well-known formulation, “**yogaḥ cittavṛtti nirodhaḥ**”—Yoga is the restraint or cessation of the modifications of the mind.

The functioning of *citta* may be understood through the analogy of a lake. When the surface of a lake is disturbed by ripples or when the water is muddy, its depth cannot be clearly seen. Similarly, when the mind is continuously disturbed by various modifications, desires and attachments, its deeper nature cannot be clearly understood. In this analogy, the lake represents *citta* and the ripples represent *vṛttis*.

Yoga philosophy also explains the functioning of the mind through the three *guṇas*: *Tamas*, *Rajas* and *Sattva*. *Tamas* is associated with dullness and inertia, *Rajas* with activity and the pursuit of power and *Sattva* with balance and clarity. From this perspective, excessive *Rajas* and *Tamas* may make the mind more susceptible to desire, attachment, aggression or self-centred action, while *Sattva* is associated with greater balance and clarity.

- ***Cittavṛttis* and Corrupt Behaviour**

Patañjali identifies five modifications of the mind: *pramāṇa*, *viparyaya*, *vikalpa*, *nidrā* and *smṛti*.

Yoga Sūtra 1.7 *pratyakṣānumānāgamāḥ pramāṇāni*: *Pramāṇa* refers to valid knowledge obtained through perception, inference and testimony. In relation to corruption, an individual may observe that corrupt behaviour frequently goes unpunished and may therefore infer that such behaviour is acceptable. The normalization of practices such as “speed money” can further reinforce such beliefs.

Yoga Sūtra 1.8 viparyayo mithyajnanam atadroopapratishtham: Viparyaya refers to false or erroneous knowledge. A person may justify corrupt conduct by refusing to acknowledge its harmful consequences for society.

Yoga Sūtra 1.9 shabdajnaanupati vastushoonyo vikalpah: Vikalpa refers to a mental modification based on words or concepts without corresponding reality. In the context of corruption, individuals may construct beliefs that rationalize unethical conduct—for example, believing that corruption is harmless because “everyone does it.”

Yoga Sūtra 1.11 anubhootavishayasanpramoshah smritih: Smṛti refers to memory or the retention of impressions from previous experiences. When an individual experiences material or social benefits through corrupt practices, that experience may leave a strong impression and encourage repetition of similar behaviour.

Yoga Sūtra 1.12 abhyasavairagyabhyas tannirodhah: Patañjali states that these mental modifications can be controlled through **practice (abhyāsa) and non-attachment (vairāgya)**. This provides an important philosophical basis for developing self-control and reducing the influence of habitual desires.

- **Kleśas and the Psychological Roots of Corruption**

Yoga Sūtra 2.3 avidyā asmitā rāga dveṣa abhiniveśaḥ pañca kleśāḥ : Patañjali identifies five kleśas: *avidyā*, *asmitā*, *rāga*, *dveṣa* and *abhiniveśa*. These may broadly be understood as ignorance, misplaced identification, attachment, aversion and clinging. He further states that attachment follows pleasure (**Yoga Sutra 2.7 sukha anuśayī rāgaḥ**) and aversion follows pain (**Yoga Sutra 2.8 duḥkha anuśayī dveṣaḥ**).

This can be seen through the lens of these concepts in terms of how desires and attachments can be involved in unethical behaviors. If someone is very attached to wealth, power, or status, there is a tendency to sacrifice morality in order to attain these things.

There is a sense that corruption is an internal and an external issue in itself. One's decisions can be affected by the corrupt surroundings but at the same time one will be involved in maintaining these surroundings. Ethical transformation requires addressing both aspects of corruption.

Ethical Philosophy of Yoga

- **Yoga Beyond Physical Practice**

Yoga is usually viewed predominantly through physical exercise or āsanas. Yet, yoga philosophy is much wider than just physical practice. The Sanskrit word “yuj” means “to yoke” or “to unite,” which implies the unity of body, mind and soul, and in a wider philosophical sense, the union of an individual with universal consciousness.

Living in the modern age of globalization, consumerism, social networking and rapid development of technology, people's views on values and proper behavior change all the time. Thus, the ethical aspect of Yoga is topical due to its focus on disciplined life.

- **Aṣṭāṅga Yoga**

In his teachings Patañjali offers a path consisting of eight steps, named as Aṣṭāṅga Yoga. These eight steps include Yama, Niyama, Āsana, Prāṇāyāma, Pratyāhāra, Dhāraṇā, Dhyāna and Samādhi.

Yamas are ethical restraints, whereas Niyamas are disciplines for an individual. Āsana deals with physical exercises, Prāṇāyāma is regulation of the breath, Pratyāhāra is withdrawal of the senses, Dhāraṇā is concentration, Dhyāna is meditation and Samādhi is the ultimate state of yoga practice.

For the current research Yama and Niyama are especially important as they concern ethics and discipline.

- **Dharma, Ethical Conduct and Mokṣa**

Mokṣa, or liberation, is the final aim of Yoga philosophy. In the context of Indian philosophy as a whole, the pursuit of any higher aims goes hand-in-hand with that of Dharma. Consequently, ethics is inseparable from spirituality.

Consequently, the ethics of Yoga philosophy cannot only be viewed as something externally prescribed, but rather as something intended to transform the person. Transformation is especially applicable in regard to corruption, which is essentially a conflict between personal desire and moral/social obligation.

Yamas and Corruption

Yamas means restraining oneself, i.e. controlling one's actions, speech and thoughts. There are five kinds of Yamas—Ahimsa, Satya, Asteya, Brahmacharya and Aparigraha.

- **Ahimsā — Non-Violence**

Ahimsā refers to non-violence. Violence causes conflict, fear, and suffering that can disrupt mental balance. The concept applies on mental, verbal, and physical levels.

Corruption can also be explained through the idea of inflicting harm on other people. Misusing public office for personal gain might mean that people will have to give up certain assets, chances, or legitimate rights. In such a way corruption leads to the damage.

The practice of Ahimsā suggests that a person needs to consider the effects of his/her actions on other people and to refrain from performing those that bring undue harm.

- **Satya – Truthfulness**

Satya means the truthfulness of a person's thoughts, words, and actions. Truthfulness implies the consistency between what one says and does and the reality. It enhances moral integrity of a person.

Corruption is often associated with concealing something, manipulation and misrepresentation of the reality. A person who consciously pursues the policy of truthfulness is not likely to rationalize or hide his/her unethical behavior.

- **Asteya — Non-Stealing**

Asteya means non-stealing. It requires an individual not to take what rightfully belongs to another. Dissatisfaction and uncontrolled desire may encourage a person to seek satisfaction through possession of things that are not rightfully theirs.

From this perspective, corruption can be understood as a form of appropriation: an individual uses authority, influence or deception to obtain a benefit that they are not ethically entitled to receive. The practice of Asteya reduces excessive wants and cultivates respect for the rights and resources of others.

- **Brahmacharya — Restraint and Self-Control**

Brahmacharya is traditionally associated with celibacy and conservation of physical and mental energy. In a broader ethical context, it can also be understood as disciplined regulation of desires and avoidance of excessive indulgence.

Uncontrolled desires may lead an individual to disregard moral principles in pursuit of personal gratification. In relation to corruption, the principle of restraint is therefore significant because ethical conduct requires the ability to regulate one's impulses and desires rather than becoming their servant.

- **Aparigraha — Non-Possessiveness**

Aparigraha is especially significant in understanding corruption. It means non-possessiveness or non-accumulation.

Corruption is frequently associated with the desire to acquire wealth, goods, status or benefits beyond what is legitimately one's own. The endless desire to accumulate can generate greed and dissatisfaction. Even gifts may create obligations when they are offered with the expectation of receiving an improper favour in return.

Aparigraha encourages freedom from excessive attachment to possessions. By reducing the psychological pressure to accumulate, it can contribute to an ethical orientation in which public responsibility is placed above personal gain.

Niyamas and Ethical Development

The five *Niyamas* provide constructive disciplines for personal development. They complement the restraints represented by the Yamas by cultivating positive qualities within the individual.

- **Śauca — Purification**

Śauca means purification or cleanliness and includes purification of both body and mind. A relatively clear and disciplined mind is important for self-reflection and spiritual development.

From the perspective of corruption, purification may be understood as the cultivation of greater awareness of one's motives, desires and actions. Such awareness can support moral development and discourage self-serving conduct.

- **Santoṣa — Contentment**

Santoṣa means contentment, delight or happiness. Contentment reduces the constant desire to acquire more material possessions.

An individual who develops contentment may be less vulnerable to the temptation of obtaining wealth or benefits through unethical means. Thus, *Santoṣa* directly challenges the dissatisfaction and excessive desire that can contribute to corrupt behaviour.

- **Tapas — Self-Discipline**

Tapas literally means “heat” and refers to intentional effort and self-discipline directed towards transformation. Moral conduct requires continuous effort and the ability to regulate one's behaviour.

In the context of corruption, self-discipline enables an individual to resist temptation even when opportunities for personal gain are available. Training in the principles of Yama and Niyama can therefore support the development of such ethical discipline.

- **Svādhyāya — Self-Study**

Self-study is svādhyāya; the meaning of self-study is introspection, recollecting and reflecting on the Self. Introspection will enable a person to analyze one's motives, decisions and actions.

Introspection and self-examination may help a person identify the difference between theory and practice. This is necessary for a change of morality.

- **Īśvara-Praṇidhāna - Surrender to a Higher Principle**

Īśvara-Praṇidhāna means surrender to Īśvara or to a higher consciousness. Īśvara-Praṇidhāna is not submission, but orientation to a higher principle.

When people realize that they have to account for their actions before some moral order higher than themselves, then the selfish interests of the individuals may not be the only consideration for the decisions they make.

Conclusion

Corruption cannot just be regarded as failure of law, institution, and administration. Rather, it also has something to do with the individual's choice, desire, attachment, and ethical disposition. This does not mean that corruption can be eradicated only if there will be an improvement in the individual's moral character. Strong institutions, transparency, accountability, and legal mechanism play important roles. However, institutional efforts will be fortified when backed by individuals whose ethical awareness and discipline are sound.

The Yoga philosophy of Patañjali can give us insights into the connection of mental tendencies with ethical living. Citta-vṛtti and kleśas point out the importance of mental distraction, desire, attachment, and ignorance, while Yama and Niyama provide guidelines on how ethical living should be practiced. The ethical aspect of yoga philosophy is therefore inseparable from life.

The importance of these ethical principles can be better understood when one takes into account what may happen in the absence of these principles. Where there is no Ahimsā, there is violence; and in the absence of Satya, there is falsehood. Asteya and Aparigraha when neglected may result in appropriation and greed; similarly, there may be excess when there is no Brahmacharya. Similarly, Lack of *Shaucham* may invite various malaise, bodily as well as mental, while the absence of *Santoṣa* can leave the individual in a continuous state of dissatisfaction and craving. Without *Tapas*, *Svādhyāya* and *Īśvara-Praṇidhāna*, the individual may find it more difficult to exercise self-discipline, engage in introspection and orient life towards a higher ethical purpose.

Thus, the absence of these virtues can contribute to disorder at physical, mental, intellectual and social levels. From the perspective developed in this paper, corruption may be understood as one manifestation of such ethical disorder. When greed, attachment, uncontrolled desire and disregard for moral responsibility become dominant, the distinction between what is merely beneficial to oneself and what is ethically right may become irrelevant. The human capacity for reason and moral reflection is therefore significant because ethical life requires not merely the satisfaction of immediate instincts and desires, but the ability to regulate them in accordance with *Dharma*.

The five *Yamas*—*Ahimsā*, *Satya*, *Asteya*, *Brahmacharya* and *Aparigraha*—and the five *Niyamas*—*Śauca*, *Santoṣa*, *Tapas*, *Svādhyāya* and *Īśvara-Praṇidhāna*—together provide a framework for such ethical self-regulation. The *Niyamas* complement these restraints by cultivating purification, contentment, discipline, self-reflection and commitment to a higher purpose.

Corruption is one of the manifestations of the prevailing chaos, which we are already experiencing. It is potentially associated with the absence of these commandments in practice. The practice of these principles can contribute to the development of an ethical individual who is less driven by greed and uncontrolled desire and more capable of making morally responsible choices. Such individual transformation also has wider social implications. A society composed of individuals who value truthfulness, non-violence, restraint, contentment and non-possessiveness is better placed to develop relationships and institutions based on trust, responsibility and justice.

The ultimate goal of Yoga philosophy is *Mokṣa*, or liberation, and its spiritual objective extends far beyond the elimination of any single social evil. Nevertheless, the path towards liberation requires the cultivation of ethical and disciplined living. Patañjali's *Aṣṭāṅga Yoga* consists of *Yama*, *Niyama*, *Āsana*, *Prāṇāyāma*, *Pratyāhāra*, *Dhāraṇā*, *Dhyāna* and *Samādhi*. The ethical foundations provided by *Yama* and *Niyama* are therefore part of a larger transformative path that seeks the overall development of human life.

Yoga philosophy can consequently be understood as a **philosophy in action**. Its purpose is not restricted to addressing one particular evil or ethical problem such as corruption. Rather, it seeks to transform the individual at the level of thought, conduct and consciousness. In the context of corruption, this ethical transformation can complement external mechanisms of law and governance by strengthening the individual's capacity for self-regulation.

Therefore, while laws and institutions regulate conduct from the outside, the ethical principles of Yoga seek to cultivate regulation from within. The practice of *Yama* and *Niyama* can thus provide a philosophical pathway from **individual ethical discipline to social responsibility**, helping create individuals and communities oriented towards *Dharma*, moral integrity and a more peaceful social order.

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