

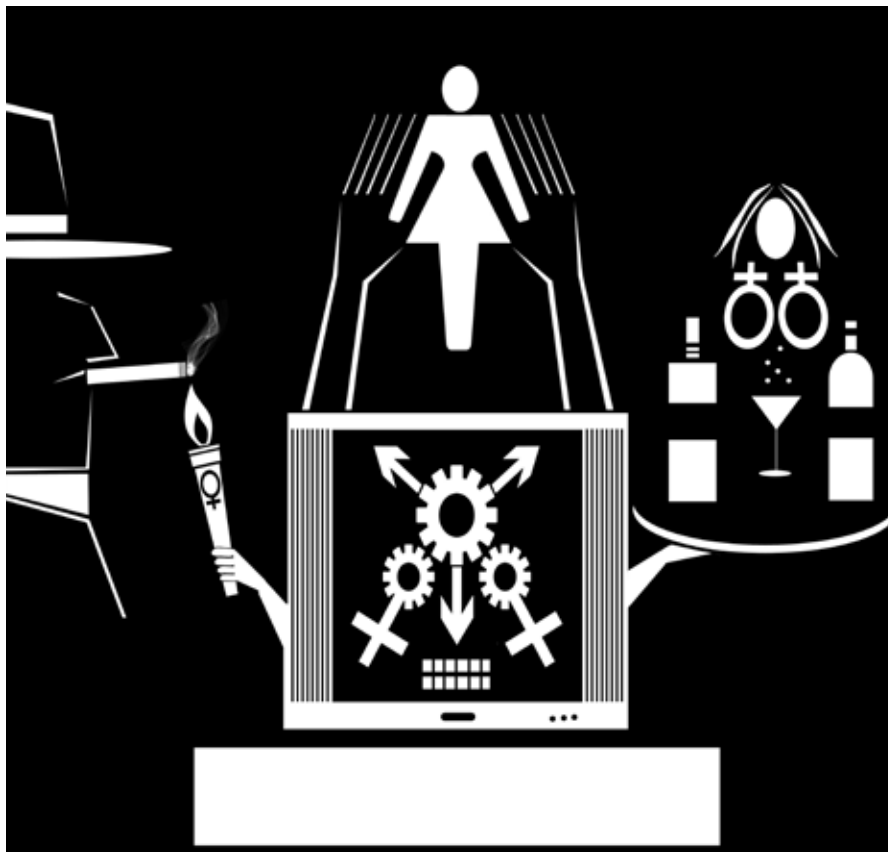
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THE WELL-OILED MEDIA MACHINE

Arun Ramkumar was perhaps influenced by the New Yorker magazine's illustration style. To interpret his illustration (above) for readers, the main predator is the television set that shows ads, serials and films objectifying women. On the left is a woman's hand trying to fight for freedom but ending up lighting a cigarette for a man. It also in a sense typifies the hypocrisy of women actors who claim to support women's initiatives but end up acting in movies and soaps that treat them as mere objects that cater to the hero's whims. On the right are liquor and women, a highly potent advertising trope that not only objectifies women but also treats them like liquor, something to be consumed and thrown away. The lustful hands at the top depict the voyeuristic and predatory attitude prevalent while depicting women in ads and soaps, not to mention pornography or acts of bondage; the hands not only prey on women but ensure the women are powerless to fight back. That's how the system works. How do women break away from the groping, chainlike arms of immoral men? On the TV screen, male and female symbols have been used as props, with the two smaller female symbols bowing down or covering before the central male symbol. It all works to a script.

- Time the ad world took a look in the mirror
- Don't ads aimed at children need regulation?
- Hindi cinema fails the feminist test
- The real mean world of mega serials
- The 'real issues' the media should address
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- Rape – an unending struggle for justice
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Online services: How effective are they?



Alok Srivastava

There is little doubt that corruption is fundamentally a problem of governance. As a matter of fact, for the survival of democracy and society, it is important to ensure that citizens manage to shrug off the laidback view that corruption in governance is now part and parcel of life and beyond redemption. Online services may help stem the rot. Although the services are often touted as user-friendly, transparent and efficient especially for public service delivery, reality is different. Yet, there is some hope

Corruption has taken a firm hold on all sections of the society in India. To look for corruption-free governance models, it is important to look at corruption with a micro lens. Identifying and analysing types of corruption as well as reasons for paying bribe or using 'contacts' is important. An in-depth empirical analysis of governance and corruption, unbundling governance into components is important. This allows a more detailed quantitative assessment of corruption, a more nuanced understanding of the causes of the problem leading towards a stronger foundation for policy advice.

For clarity's sake, corruption can broadly be categorised as one, which directly involves common citizens and two, which can be identified as institutional or systemic. In both the cases, the ultimate sufferer is the common citizen. Of late, due to the much publicised high-end corruption or systemic corruption in government at national as well as state levels, the corruption faced by common citizens on a daily basis looks miniscule and gets unreported or unnoticed. However, it is not so.

Corruption in public services has become multi-layered and so it is difficult to isolate or separate corrupt practices related to the service delivery and directly affecting citizens, from systemic or institutional-level corruption. For instance, to get a contract from the government for supplying mid-day meals in schools or food grains at public distribution system shops or drugs to government health centres, if illegal means are adopted by 'greasing the palms' of bureaucrats and/or politicians, the contractor/supplier makes all efforts to 'recover' the spent amount by providing inferior quality food items or medicines and either overcharging the customer or diverting the stocks to the open market and earning more than what was paid as bribe.

Thus, the 'transaction' between contractor (supplier) and government officials can be categorised as institutional or systemic corruption while the diversion of essential items from the designated government centres to the open-market creating scarcity or non-availability at the government service delivery point makes it a case of corruption related to service delivery to citizens, popularly known as 'petty' corruption. In normal circumstances, a citizen could have bought at subsidised rate (food grains from government ration shops) or even free of cost (medicines in government hospitals). In

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Illustration: Arun Ramkumar

short, while corruption begins at a systemic or high-end level, it is ultimately passed on to the users of the services provided by these institutions.

The complexity in suggesting a solution is like the complexity involved in identifying and quantifying the extent and spread of corruption. In India with such a socially, economically and culturally diverse population, it becomes difficult to think of

a single way of addressing the problem. High illiteracy, low access to modern and new mediums of service delivery such as online services, and linguistic barriers make the approach towards improving service delivery and making it corruption-free difficult.

E-governance is being touted as 'ram baan' or what may be called an error-free cure for corruption. Whether this will indeed be

the case, only time will tell. No doubt, on paper, as far as its application models are concerned, e-governance looks to be one of the better solutions. But it definitely is not the **only** solution. It has to work in tandem with other good measures of governance, particularly in the context of India's profile.

In India, as part of e-governance, online services are introduced in different public services by Central

and state governments with the aim towards efficient and corruption-free public services. The National e-Governance Plan as articulated in its vision statement is to “make all government services accessible to the common man in his locality, through common service delivery outlets, and ensure efficiency, transparency, and reliability of such services at affordable costs to realise the basic needs of the common man”.

However, from the common citizens’ perspective, most of the online facilities in public services are no more than pilot projects. The online service is not expected to change the scenario much in near future. For three major and critical concerns associated with online services: reach, accessibility and user-friendliness, and operationalisation of online services.

Reach: No doubt for a section of society that has access to a computer with an Internet facility, online services such as railway reservation or filling of income tax returns or paying public utility bills such as telephone/mobile phone and electricity bills, or life insurance premium, has become fairly easy. However, a quick back-of-the-envelope calculation tells you that the situation does not look impressive. As per Census 2011, only 3 per cent of households in India have a computer with Internet connectivity. Which means, users of an online facility, including those accessing online services from an Internet café, will not be more than 5 per cent. There is thus huge scope for expansion of IT services but one thing is clear: more than 90 per cent of the households use traditional methods of seeking public services and continue to be at the mercy of service providers. Needless to add, ‘online’ cannot come to the rescue of a major proportion of common citizens in the near future.

Accessibility or user-friendly portal/website: Most of the portals and websites, including the most visited ones such as the one for railway reservation (IRCTC/indianrail.gov) or for filing income tax returns are in English. As per Census 2001 (Census 2011 findings on this parameter is yet to be released), only 12.5 per cent of Indians have identified English as their first or second or even third language. A far less proportion of people can use online services if they are not in a language they are proficient in or at least have a working knowledge of. Until this happens, the users of services will continue to depend on ‘others’, most likely middlemen.

Another example is that of an e-stamp paper. The aim is to have hassle-free transactions and keep a check on fraudulent practices such as fake stamp papers getting circulated. But it has been observed that to buy an e-stamp paper, extra money (illegal) as commission is still charged at service outlets. The e-stamp paper may help reduce systemic corruption but at the delivery point level, the ‘service charges’ put on common citizens continues.

Operationalisation of services: It’s another major challenge, particularly for service providers. It has more to do with back-end efficiency unlike the first two, which pertain to front-end usage. With an increase in the number of users, the concern with online services is its capacity to handle demand. Besides the slowing

down of web-based services, the updating of information at regular intervals is also noticeably missing on websites. For instance, e-procurement and e-tender are no doubt good tools that paves the way towards a transparent system but in transactions, particularly financial ones, the hacking of personal confidential information is a major concern for most online service users.

The National Crime Records Bureau Report, Crime in India 2011, has thrown light on how the nation has fared as far as cyber crimes go. According to the report, the number of cases registered under the country’s IT Act in 2011 year was 1791 – a considerable rise of 85 per cent from the 966 cases registered the previous year. The confidence-building exercise needs to be taken vigorously and highlighted as much as possible for increasing the usage of online services.

Another observation with regard to online services is the unaccountability of local offices. Previously, you would have gone to the local office for redress of grievance related to non-operation of a service. Now, with online services available, any complaint/request receives a standard response: the central server is down or slow and the local office staff is helpless as they cannot rectify the technical snag. Which is also true for service users. All this leaves a negative impression about online services and its efficiency.

A new-look *Chennai Chronicle*

Chennai Chronicle, the daily supplement with *Deccan Chronicle*, unveiled its new look recently. With Ajay Reddy as senior editor, *Chennai Chronicle* has a fortified editorial team that has driven the new product. The revamp involves new colour pages, new fonts, new shapes and new ideas. *Chennai Chronicle* was launched in March 2005. Over the past eight years, there has been two design revamps.