

# The genesis of corruption in Asia

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In a small village near my home in Thailand a young man from a prominent landholding family agreed to “go to the monks”, that is to say, to become a Buddhist monk, for a week. The solemn announcement was a great relief to the entire extended family for their generation was now guaranteed a link with divinity. A link with divinity carries with it a certain promise of good luck and prosperity. The solemn occasion was marked with a party that was lavish, as it was wild. Hundreds of thousands of Baht were spent on food, booze, and colored tube light decorations. The young man who had volunteered for monk-hood was taken to the Wat in a musical procession the following day. He is expected to return in a week and bring good fortune to his family and to the entire village.

Most Asians are fatalists and given to superstition. Unknown forces of the cosmos are thought to determine luck and luck is considered to be the operative force in our lives that determines whether we are rich or poor and healthy or sick. In this context, religion is, in practical terms, a device to control the unknown forces of luck. Used in this way, religion allows the devotee to overcome his fated lot because it allows him to influence superstition for personal gain. Because of these relationships, religion in Asia often deteriorates into nothing more than a mechanism by which one can gain unfair advantage in social competition. This kind of behavior implies a spooky connection between religion and corruption.

Here in Thailand, as in other parts of Asia, one observes this curious relationship between man and god. Devotees visit temples not so much to worship; nor to get in touch with their inner spirituality; but to ask for favors. These favors include such worldly things as to pass examinations, to bear children, and to succeed in business ventures or to protect agriculture from drought and pestilence.

Most requests are for financial gain and they are thought to require a proportional financial offering. Non financial requests, particularly from devotees who are not rich, may require only non-financial offerings. The most popular non-financial “prarthona” or prayer has to do with reproduction. Men seek sexual potency. Women who are not pregnant want to conceive. Women who are already pregnant want to make a gender selection. The lovelorn want to gain favor from the object of their affection. Couples already married want a celestial guarantee of success.

The other popular non-financial prarthona has to do with education - not so much to be educated as to pass examinations. Around the national examination dates – just before the examination and just before the results are published – temples are awash in flowers, fruits, colored rice, and financial offerings.

Of course, worship must be included in the ritual since favors are more likely to be granted to devotees who are truly devoted. Worship is necessary but not sufficient to secure favors from the gods, however, and so the devotee must bring gifts for the deity to whom the request is made. Of course it may be, and often is, a humble offering like fruits or bowls of rice but the gifts are sometimes extravagant. The size and value of the gift goes up in proportion to the size of the favor and the wealth of the devotee. For really wealthy patrons with serious business needs, a large financial contribution or perhaps a new spirit house or even a temple is in order. The purpose of all this gift giving is to expedite the benevolence of the deities.

Those who do not make offerings risk failure in a highly competitive society. This pattern of gift giving to deities to gain preferential treatment has become deeply ingrained. The essential characteristic of this system is that it circumvents and thereby corrupts the rule of law. It teaches

Asians that it is not necessary to play by the rules. Fairness and equal opportunity go out the window. Each individual seeks to achieve some kind of unfair advantage by currying favor with the gods.

The correspondence of this system to the classical theory of corruption is all too obvious. The deity exercises monopoly power with no accountability. The devotee seeks preferential treatment. And devotees soon learn to relate "prarthona" to gift giving. "Prarthona", the Sanskrit word for prayer also means, "to want".

When the source of the monopoly power is shifted from deities to kings, landlords, bureaucrats, and elected officials, the offering becomes a bribe. There is a fuzzy line between religious offerings and graft. Bribery behavior in Asia is weirdly like that of religious worship.

Corruption in Asia is not skin deep and it will likely not be cured by superficial structural changes as envisaged by the scholars or by a war on a timetable as envisaged by our political leaders who, incidentally, are themselves corrupt. Corruption is a way of life that lives deep in the Asian psyche and religious tradition.

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