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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

When Graft Stops Shocking: The Quiet Death of Outrage

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CURATED & WRITTEN BY

**Bharat Choudhary**

UPSC Educator & Content Creator

 linkedin.com/in/epicbharat

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THE LIFT LINE

The gravest danger of corruption is not that it happens, but that a point is reached where it no longer surprises anyone, and a society that has stopped being shocked has quietly stopped holding power to account.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

Pratap Bhanu Mehta's argument is that corruption in India has been normalised so thoroughly that even large-scale graft rarely produces sustained political or public outrage any more. The concern is less about any one scandal and more about the **atrophy** (<https://ujjyari.com/vocab/atrophy/>) of the collective reflex that once made corruption costly. This connects GS2 governance and accountability with GS4 ethics and public probity, and it must be handled analytically and non-partisanly.

GS Paper 2: transparency and accountability, institutional mechanisms to check corruption, the role of civil society and citizens.

GS Paper 4: **probity** (<https://ujjyari.com/vocab/probity/>) in governance, philosophical basis of governance, accountability and ethical dimensions of public service.

For **Prelims**, hold the institutional map: the Comptroller and Auditor General under Article 148, the Central Vigilance (<https://ujjyari.com/vocab/vigilance/>) Commission, the Lokpal and Lokayuktas Act 2013, the Central Bureau of Investigation, and the Prevention of Corruption Act 1988. For **Mains** and ethics, argue that legal machinery is necessary but insufficient, and that public intolerance is the ultimate deterrent.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

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India built, over decades, an architecture designed to check corruption: constitutional audit through the CAG, vigilance oversight through the CVC, an anti-corruption ombudsman in the Lokpal (<https://ujiyari.com/terms/lokpal/>), investigative capacity in the CBI, and criminal sanction under the Prevention of Corruption Act. These institutions were meant to detect, expose and punish graft, backed by a free press and an alert public that would convert exposure into political consequence.

The editorial's worry is that the final link in this chain, public and political reaction, has weakened. When exposure no longer produces outrage, when scandals are absorbed as routine and voters and commentators shrug, the deterrent effect of the whole system fades. Institutions may still function on paper, but their findings lose their sting if nobody is scandalised by them. The normalisation of corruption is thus not just a moral loss but a structural weakening of accountability.

THE CORE ARGUMENT / ISSUE

Normalisation dulls the deterrent

The cost of corruption for a public figure was once partly reputational and political. When society expects graft and is unsurprised by it, that reputational cost collapses, and the calculation shifts in favour of wrongdoing.

Institutions need a public that cares

The CAG can audit, the CVC can flag, the CBI can investigate, but the political consequence that gives these findings force depends on citizens and the press treating exposure as serious. Weaken public reaction and even a robust institution produces reports that change nothing.

Selectivity breeds cynicism

When anti-corruption action is perceived as selective or partisan, citizens stop reading exposure as a signal of wrongdoing and start reading it as a signal of political targeting. That cynicism, corrosive on all sides, further drains outrage from the system and should be resisted regardless of which party is in power.

LAYER OF ACCOUNTABILITY	FUNCTION	WHAT NORMALISATION DOES TO IT
Constitutional audit (CAG)	Detects misuse of funds	Reports noted, then forgotten
Vigilance and investigation (CVC, CBI)	Flags and probes graft	Seen as selective, credibility eroded
Political consequence	Punishes at the ballot	Outrage absent, deterrent lost
Ethical norm	Makes graft shameful	Shame replaced by resignation

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (ANALYTICAL FRAME)

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Separate the legal fact of corruption from its social **salience** (<https://ujjayi.com/vocab/salience/>). A society controls corruption through two channels: formal sanction and informal disapproval. Formal sanction without informal disapproval is brittle, because enforcement is patchy and slow, while disapproval is constant and universal. The transferable rule: the durability of anti-corruption depends less on the number of laws and agencies than on whether the public retains its capacity to be scandalised. Rebuilding accountability therefore means restoring both institutional credibility and the civic reflex of outrage.

THE DIAGRAM IN WORDS

Anti-corruption architecture exists (CAG, CVC, Lokpal, CBI, PC Act) -> but scandals no longer shock -> outrage fades + action seen as selective -> political and reputational cost collapses -> deterrent weakens -> institutions produce reports that change nothing -> fix: restore institutional independence + non-partisan enforcement + civic vigilance that reconverts exposure into consequence

WAY FORWARD

- ① **Strengthen institutional independence.** Insulate the CAG, CVC, Lokpal and investigative agencies from perceptions of partisan use, so their findings are trusted across the political spectrum.
- ② **Make enforcement visibly even-handed.** Pursue corruption regardless of who is implicated, because selectivity is what converts citizen concern into cynicism.
- ③ **Reinforce transparency tools.** Protect the Right to Information regime, **whistleblower** (<https://ujjayi.com/terms/whistleblower/>) safeguards and open data, which lower the cost of exposure and keep facts in public view.
- ④ **Rebuild the ethical baseline.** Through civic education, a responsible press and public discourse, restore the expectation that probity is the norm and graft is shameful, not routine.

PYQ LINKAGE AND PRACTICE

UPSC has asked about the effectiveness of anti-corruption institutions, the role of citizens in ensuring accountability, and the ethical dimensions of governance. This editorial links those to the deeper problem of eroded public outrage.

Practice question: “The most serious threat posed by corruption is not the act itself but the erosion of society’s capacity to be outraged by it.” Critically examine with reference to the working of India’s accountability institutions. (250 words, 15 marks)

Sources: *The Indian Express* (<https://indianexpress.com/section/opinion/editorials/>)

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