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Beyond the Bad Apple: Corruption as a Failure of the System

 **THE HINDU**

22 July 2026

POLITY**GS2****GS4**

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GS2

GS4

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THE LIFT LINE

Corruption is rarely the failure of a single dishonest official. It is the predictable output of a system where the honest are unprotected, the powerful are unaccountable, and the paper trail can quietly disappear.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

Every anti-corruption debate reaches for the language of morality: better values, cleaner people. That framing is comforting and incomplete. When bribery, leakage and capture persist across governments and departments, the honest explanation is structural: weak enforcement, hollow transparency, and whistle-blowers left exposed. This editorial reframes corruption from a personal vice into a governance failure, which is exactly how the exam wants you to argue it.

GS Paper 2: transparency and accountability institutions, **statutory** anti-corruption bodies, and the Right to Information ecosystem. **GS Paper 4:** **probity** in governance, the ethics of public service, and why individual integrity needs institutional scaffolding. For **Prelims**, hold the specifics: the **Prevention of Corruption Act, 1988** (amended in 2018 to also cover the bribe-giver and to require prior approval to investigate officials); the **Central Vigilance Commission (CVC)**, given statutory status in 2003; the **Lokpal and Lokayuktas Act, 2013**; the **Right to Information Act, 2005**; the **Whistle Blowers Protection Act, 2014**, passed but not fully operationalised; the **Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG)** under **Article 148**; and India's rank on **Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI)**. For **Mains**, the line is that curbing corruption needs institutional enforcement and rule-of-law revival, not moral appeals alone.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The moral-lapse view says corruption is what bad individuals do; remove them and integrity returns. The systemic view says individuals respond to incentives, and where detection is unlikely, punishment is slow, and honesty is penalised, corruption becomes rational behaviour even for otherwise decent people. The Second Administrative Reforms Commission, in its report on ethics in governance, located the problem in institutional design, monopoly of power, wide discretion and weak accountability, not merely in character.

India has, on paper, a strong anti-corruption architecture: a statutory vigilance commission, an anti-corruption statute, a national anti-corruption ombudsman, a transparency law and a constitutional auditor. The gap is between the statute book and the enforcement reality.

THE CORE ARGUMENT / ISSUE

Enforcement, not exhortation

Laws deter only when detection and conviction are real. Sanction-to-prosecute requirements, delayed trials, and thin conviction rates blunt the **Prevention of Corruption Act**. The **CVC** advises and supervises but depends on the agencies it oversees. The **Lokpal** exists but its impact is judged by how many powerful cases it actually pursues. **Deterrence** collapses when the powerful believe the process will exhaust itself before it reaches them.

The unprotected whistle-blower

A system that punishes the person who reports wrongdoing is designed to stay corrupt. The **Whistle Blowers Protection Act, 2014** was enacted but never fully operationalised, leaving informants exposed. Without credible protection, the cheapest early-warning system a state has, its own honest insiders, is switched off.

Transparency as the disinfectant

PILLAR	INSTRUMENT	CURRENT WEAKNESS
Right to know	RTI Act, 2005	Delays, denials, pressure on commissions
Independent audit	CAG, Article 148	Findings tabled but slow to translate into accountability
Vigilance	CVC (statutory, 2003)	Depends on investigating agencies
Ombudsman	Lokpal, 2013	Judged by cases actually pursued
Informant safety	Whistle Blowers Act, 2014	Not fully operationalised

The **RTI Act** and the **CAG** are the sunlight that makes hidden dealings costly. Weakening either dims the one deterrent that works without a courtroom.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (ANALYTICAL FRAME)

Use a simple diagnostic drawn from the classic formulation: corruption thrives where monopoly power and wide discretion meet low accountability. Reduce any one and corruption falls. So ask of any reform: does it narrow arbitrary discretion, does it raise the odds of getting caught, does it protect those who report, and does it make punishment swift and certain? Moral appeals move none of these levers. Institutions do.

THE DIAGRAM IN WORDS

Weak enforcement + exposed whistle-blowers + diluted transparency -> low risk for the corrupt -> corruption becomes rational versus Strong enforcement + protected informants + robust RTI and audit -> high risk of detection -> probity becomes the sensible choice

WAY FORWARD

- 1 **Make enforcement swift and certain.** Fast-track corruption trials, strengthen the Lokpal and CVC's independence, and ensure sanction requirements do not become shields for the powerful.
- 2 **Operationalise whistle-blower protection.** Fully implement the Whistle Blowers Protection Act with real anonymity, anti-retaliation guarantees and a credible grievance channel.
- 3 **Defend transparency law.** Protect the RTI Act's independence and timelines, and ensure CAG findings feed promptly into accountability, not archives.
- 4 **Design out discretion.** Cut arbitrary discretion through digital, rule-bound processes and e-governance, following the Second ARC's emphasis on institutional reform over moral exhortation.

PYQ LINKAGE AND PRACTICE

This links to GS4 questions on probity in governance and on the relationship between laws and ethics, and to GS2 questions on the role of civil services, RTI and anti-corruption bodies. UPSC has repeatedly asked whether laws or morality better curb corruption, and this editorial supplies the systemic answer: both, but institutions carry the weight.

Practice question: "Corruption is less a failure of individual character than of institutional design."

Critically examine, and suggest structural reforms to strengthen probity in Indian governance. (15 marks, 250 words)

Sources: The Hindu editorial page, Central Vigilance Commission, Lokpal of India, Second ARC report on Ethics in Governance

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