

Rotten to the Core

WHILE ADDRESSING A CONFERENCE of CBI and state anti-corruption bureaus recently, Prime Minister Dr Man Mohan Singh said that "while petty cases get tackled quickly, the big fish often escape punishment. This has to change. Rapid, fair and accurate investigation of allegations of corruption in high places should remain your utmost priority. The nation expects you to act firmly, swiftly and without fear or favour." The Prime Minister must be congratulated for highlighting this aspect. But experience shows that the problem of corruption is first and foremost at the level of ministers. The bureaucracy is only interested in its cuts. It matters little to them whether they make money in planting trees, cutting trees or raising bills for the plantation of non-existent trees. Whether trees are planted or cut depends mostly on the fancies of the Ministers. It is seen the same bureaucracy that was allowing parks to die a slow death has become hyperactive in building statues because a Chief Minister wants so. The fact is that corruption from the lowest levels to the 'big fish' is wholly integrated with the ministers. One street corner police constable lamented that he had to pass on Rs 200 to higher officials out of the Rs 400 he had collected during the day. The upshot is that the bureaucracy will more or less behave if the Ministers are made accountable first. Corruption of the 'big fish' cannot be controlled if the ministers are corrupt. Indeed, honest bureaucracy can be even more devastating in conjunction with corrupt politicians.

Here lies main difference in the governance system of China and India. China, it seems, has a more honest bureaucracy than India. But this has often times led to the strict implementation of bad policies. The private lands of farmers were confiscated by the bureaucrats in the fifties and converted into collective farms. These farms proved bad for the economy. Food production dwindled. Then the collective farms were re-privatized in the seventies. This led to much unnecessary pain to all concerned. China might have escaped such pain had the bureaucracy been less honest. Similarly, professors were forcibly sent to the countryside to learn from the peasants in the heydays of the Cultural Revolution. This led to China losing many years of valuable teaching. Today China is selling her natural resources to foreign buyers at throwaway prices. This will surely create a huge environmental problem in years to come. It is possible for China to implement such wrong policies because the bureaucracy is relatively honest, corrupt officials are sometimes punished with death and public dissent is stifled. It is difficult to implement such decisions in India.

An unholy alliance of bureaucrats, judges, NGOs and religious heads is being led by the ministers this country today. Constitution expert Subhash C Kashyap says, "Leaving aside a few exceptions, these are part of one establishment. None of these has any fundamental interest in changing the corrupt system. Seeing these, the public starts serving its own petty interests. Today people denigrate an honest man saying 'He does not do his own good, nor ours. He only teaches us the law.'" Members of this unholy alliance make cosmetic attacks on each other as in a stage drama without hurting the other. Their objective is to fool the public into believing that they are crusading against corruption while they are themselves leading this. □□□ *[contributed]*