



The cleanest officer

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I recently celebrated 30 years in India. It is a long time in the life of an individual. I have never regretted the choice I made in 1974, when I decided to leave my "native country" and settle in the great land of India. Looking back, many things have changed. India is emerging as one of the future leading powers in the world. Dozens of articles, research papers and studies have been published in the past couple of years on the role India is featured to play in the 21st century. Many even predict that India along with China will overtake the US as the front-ranking economic power of the planet.

Whether India is really shining or not is a matter of perspective as the NDA discovered after the last Lok Sabha elections. Personally, but every morning I get distressed and saddened when I read the newspapers. It seems to me that the situation worsens with each passing year. Having spent many years in the land of rishis and sages, one could have thought that equanimity would have percolated my mind. It does not seem to be the case!

I have just to look at the titles: The jails of Bihar used as a durbar for criminals, "constitutional" coups spearheaded by governors, the police's dubious role in a mutt saga. And everybody knows that it is just the tip of the iceberg. Invariably, my (French) blood starts to boil, not only due to the big scams, but also the more innocuous news. An example recently read: "The rate of registration of births in Bihar fell

from 23 per cent in 1996 to just 0.8 per cent in 2003 while Uttar Pradesh has not sent records of birth and death registration to the Centre for the last eight years because of lack of forms." Everyone is so used to this type of administrative failure that nobody really cares anymore. One usually jumps over such news reports without reading it; it is not news, it is common knowledge.

There is another type of scam - it could be termed "la Robin Hood". The latest one involves Reliance Infocomm. The largest Indian business group was accused of having cheated the DoT of some Rs 150 crore by "illegally" routing international calls its own way. A penalty was imposed on the ground that the private operator had violated license conditions. When Reliance approached the Tribunal (TDSAT); the verdict was quick to fall: Reliance had put the security of the nation in jeopardy by indulging in such illegal activities (sic). Finally, Chairman of company Mukesh Ambani decided to pay the bill: "The payment has been made so that the issues in dispute can be viewed dispassionately... We have full faith in the judicial process and are confident of vindicating our stand... There has been no impropriety on our part."

The truth of the matter is that the company in question has at times displayed a certain expertise to circumvent "Government rules" to its own benefit, though ultimately it also benefits the general public as it has forced the Government to look at outdated rules. In fact, if the system had not been subverted, the Indian public would perhaps still be paying Rs 80 per minute for a call to the US. A report published in Hong Kong found that India is the fourth most corrupt country in Asia, though grafting in China poses the biggest global threat according to the survey conducted by the Political and Economic Risk Consultancy Ltd giving the annual graft rankings. Of course, Singapore was found

the least corrupt, followed by Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan and South Korea.

Indonesia, Asia's most corrupt nation, received 9.25 points on a scale from zero to 10, followed by the Philippines, which ranked No 2 with a score of 8.9. Vietnam was No 3 due "rampant corruption in powerful state-controlled companies", while India missed the bronze and made it to the fourth place on the list. It is interesting to note the reason assigned to India's ranking. According to the report, it was due to the country's "suffocating bureaucracy which created plenty of opportunities for payoffs to cut through red tape".

China is fifth with 7.33, but the report noted that corruption is so bad in the Middle Kingdom that communist leaders have been warned that the problem could upset social stability and derail the economy: "China's growing economic role in the region and the world ensures that the global fallout from any crisis precipitated by corruption on the mainland would be severe," the survey pointed out. "With the world's growing reliance on China as a production base, such a crisis would wreak havoc." Companies operating outside China are cited: "What's worse, when they get in trouble, the mainland parent usually washes its hands of the whole affair, saying it was not its fault."

However, there are also uplifting experiments. A magazine, The Ladakh Melong (The Mirror), decided recently to conduct a survey to elect Leh district's cleanest officer. The Melong wrote: "Sincerity and dedication may remain unnoticed in the beginning, but it always pays. All great saints and sages of the past went through various trials and tribulations, but they saw, later in their lives, truth always triumphed. After 30 hard years of selfless service, Sonam Morup was chosen by the people as the most honest officer in Leh district." It is good to read that truth always prevails.

The objective of the magazine is to honour, every year, officers who are dedicated, sincere and efficient in their professions. It said: "It must have come as a surprise to Morup who had learnt to live with sidelining and harassment and had no expectation of being honoured for his honesty someday in his life." Sonam Morup is a Superintendent Engineer in the PWD. He comes from a humble family of musicians that have traditionally been considered "untouchable" (even in the Buddhist region, musicians and blacksmiths were for centuries considered outcastes).

Morup, who has served for 30 years "honestly without amassing public money", told the magazine: "Some years back, I was told that my life was in danger due to my honesty, and the district administration had to position some policemen to guard me. But even then I never gave up my commitment to sincerity." He admits that his sincerity has been an obstacle for his own routine promotion "because in the PWD department employees suffer of red-tapism and irregularities". He candidly explained that since he had little time and money, he was not able to track his file for his due promotion on the basis of seniority, with the result that his promotion had been delayed for two years.

Morup likes his work: "It is our duty to work from 10 to four (the workings hours in Ladakh are reduced due to cold). If you work a little more than the required hours, you feel more satisfied at the end of the day. I always tell my juniors that ideally we should work one or two hours more to compensate for the time we might have wasted during the working hours."

There are millions of Morups who work for the good of the people in India. Why can't the national press highlight their trials, their pains and their satisfactions? Leh has taken the initiative, but why can't every district of India reward its cleanest civil servant annually? The

main problem in India is that civil (meaning the citizens') servants have become Government servants. Until this changes, Bharat cannot give a close fight to Singapore for the "Most Honest Asian Nation" award.