

Regional Comment

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Greed and lethargy fuel India's corrupt

V.S. Naipaul's "craze for phoren", a phrase that a middle-aged, middle-class Delhi housewife supposedly uses about herself, has passed into the language to depict the Indian yearning for all the consumer luxuries that were officially unavailable during those dark decades of socialist autarky. India's rich definitely didn't share their government's pride in import substitution.

But it would have been outrageously sinful for anyone to say out loud that the economy should be opened up so that India joined the global mainstream. Much of the corruption that riddles Indian life can be traced to this gulf between principle and practice, and the fiction that India abides by certain spiritual values while other Asian countries ape the materialistic West.

When electoral laws were framed in the 1950s, very low ceilings were set on the amount of money a parliamentary candidate could spend on his campaign. The rationale for this legacy of Mahatma Gandhi's poverty mission was that leaders of the world's largest democracy didn't need money to convince voters of their worth. But as former prime minister Atal Behari Vajpayee remarked famously, every legislator starts his career with the lie of a false account of his election expenses. Public acknowledgement of money power would betray the piety that Indian politics still claims as its main inspiration; but

the tycoons who alone can provide funds on the scale needed must also be allowed to recoup their outlay in ways that don't attract the taxman's attention.

The dichotomy goes back to the Mahatma's own Spartan lifestyle which prompted an admirer with a mischievous sense of humour to chuckle that keeping him in poverty was an expensive business.

India abounds in such contradictions. It used to be said that Indians drank more Scotch whisky than the stills of Scotland turned out. Some of it was local hooch masquerading as Scotch but quantities of the genuine stuff were also smuggled in at great cost while compliant Customs and Excise officials looked the other way. It was the same with a whole range of commodities, from edibles to gold, of which India is the world's largest importer. The hawala underground banking system services this flourishing trade in contraband.

Vajpayee's stricture applies to other professions as well. Most lawyers and doctors demand cash payment. Few condescend to give receipts. It's virtually impossible to buy, sell or rent an apartment without forking out cash for about 40 percent of the total.

It was assumed that this black economy would wither away when the liberalization that Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao and Dr Manmohan Singh, who then held the finance portfolio, introduced in 1991 made imports and remittances of money abroad easier. "If

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we remove controls, the corrupt are easily identified, isolated and punished" was Home Minister P. Chidambaram's view. If anything, the greater liquidity accompanying the abolition of controls has encouraged corruption on a grander scale. The flood of foreign investment and spurt in business activity means many more deals and greatly increased scope for cuts and commissions that are salted away abroad.

No shame attaches to these under-the-counter transactions. On the contrary, a friend in the World Bank told me that his numerous Indian colleagues went around with puffed chests when the Swedes claimed they had paid more than \$50 million in bribes for India's \$1.6 billion purchase of Bofors howitzer guns. "We're in the big boys' league now!" Indians in New York seemed to boast. No

wonder there was no response when another prime minister, Inder Kumar Gujral, said he hung his head in shame at the extent of corruption and urged businessmen to report every demand for a bribe to a special cell in his office. No one did.

It would be pot calling the kettle black for any political party to accuse another of corruption. That is why the grim prophecy by India's first president, Rajendra Prasad, that corruption would "verily prove a nail in the coffin of the Congress" has not been fulfilled. Singh is himself a man of unimpeachable integrity (cynics say because he has never fought an election!) but with new scandals surfacing almost every week, he appears to be dragging his feet on punishing corrupt colleagues. India's image abroad is getting tarnished. In time, this could affect investment and growth and dangerously compound the existing imbalance between the rich and the poor.

Many years ago a respected Indian civil servant lamented that more and more officials were refusing to perform their ordinary duties unless they received what was euphemistically called "speed money". It has become "a way of life".

I mentioned this to the late prime minister, Rajiv Gandhi, when he said that only a strong consumer movement could solve many of India's problems. Several Indian states do boast moderately successful consumer movements but, by and large, ordinary citizens have little redress against official greed and lethargy.

However, two measures might still provide partial relief. First, a 1960s committee recommendation that the apex anti-corruption authority, the Central Vigilance Commission, should be empowered to initiate inquiries and investigate the conduct of the senior most government leaders. Second, beefing up the corrective machinery so that an honest police force and an impartial judiciary can bring the guilty quickly to book.

With only 13 judges a million people and the police prone to cut corners, criminals have little to fear now, as a WikiLeaks document confirmed. Ramshackle courtrooms, dilatory, underpaid court officials, cunningly exploitative lawyers and venal judges make for a "lagging justice system".

An overhauled police and judiciary would give a strong consumer movement a chance. But the politicians who alone can legislate on and enforce reforms are hand in glove with the businessmen who finance elections and are said to have stashed away more than \$450 billion in foreign tax havens.

Juvenal's "Quis custodiet ipsos/Custodes? Who is to guard the guards themselves?" might aptly be asked of today's India.

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THE YOMIURI SHIMBUN

Torch of sumo tradition flickers after match-fixing

Can the Japan Sumo Association (JSA) continue to bear the responsibility of carrying on sumo as the "national sport"? The JSA faces the crisis of its existence being called into question as it has been forced to cancel a forthcoming sumo tournament.

Shaken by a match-fixing scandal, the JSA decided on Feb 6 to cancel the Spring Grand Sumo Tournament scheduled to start on March 13 at Osaka Prefectural Gymnasium.

It is the first cancellation of a grand tournament in 65 years since the 1946 summer grand tournament was canceled due to a delay in repair work on the previous Ryogoku Kokugikan sumo arena amid the postwar chaos. This is the

first time for a grand tournament to be canceled due to a scandal, leaving a hard-to-erase blemish on the long history of sumo.

As reasons for the cancellation, the association said, among other things, it would otherwise be impossible to obtain the understanding of fans and it would take time to conduct investigations of the 14 current and former sumo wrestlers allegedly involved in the scandal. JSA Chairman Hanaregoma told a news conference, "We cannot show sumo matches on the dohyo ring until we can eliminate the pus [from the sport]."

The top priority of the JSA should be to thoroughly probe the match-fixing scandal and severely punish all found to be involved. If this is taken into consideration, the JSA's

cancellation of the spring grand tournament was the right decision.

Match-fixing flatly contradicts any claim that sumo is a real fighting sport. It also represents a betrayal of the fans, who expect to see hard-fought bouts.

Many fans in Osaka must feel regret over the cancellation of the spring tournament, which is the only basho held in the city each year.

But if the tournament were to be held under the present circumstances, suspicious eyes would be cast even over wrestlers not involved in the match-fixing scandal. If sumo becomes suspect, it does not deserve the claim of being the national sport.

A seven-member special investigation panel, consisting of four lawyers and three other outsiders,

is tasked with uncovering the whole truth behind the scandal. The panel has conducted a questionnaire survey of all wrestlers and other JSA members concerning their involvement in the match-fixing scandal. But we think it is impossible to grasp the whole picture with such a pro forma probe alone.

It is necessary to make in-depth investigations by going as far as interrogating the suspected wrestlers after analyzing past bouts suspected to have been fixed.

The JSA had persistently asserted, "There is no match-fixing whatsoever." The association has established punitive steps for intentionally spiritless bouts and issued warnings to wrestlers every time their bouts were found to lack a fighting spirit. But it had never

probed whether they fixed matches.

As some of the 14 current and former wrestlers suspected to have been involved in the scandal admitted the alleged match-fixing, the JSA's assumption of "no match-fixing whatsoever" has crumbled. The association must clearly mention in its punitive provisions that wrestlers found to be involved in match-fixing will be expelled from the sumo world.

The JSA is a public-interest corporation entitled to preferential tax treatment. The association must remember it has the responsibility of working out measures that can convince the public that the sport is clean.

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