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THE ROOTS OF CORRUPTION

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ONE could never believe the story, which went around as furtively as the paper on a presidential form of government during the emergency, that its author was Mr. B. K. Nehru. The document was couched in such execrable English and was full of such crass ignorance as to belie the story and betray its author. None were surprised when Mr. A. R. Antulay owned up the paper.

To savour Mr. Nehru's prose one should read his G. L. Mehta Memorial lecture on "The Roots of Corruption" delivered at Madras on December 22. Mr. Nehru and Mr. Antulay differ as much as a highly qualified medical practitioner and a witch doctor. But one cannot help wringing one's hands in despair if after a most perceptive diagnosis the former proceeds to prescribe, nonetheless, remedies which cannot possibly cure the ailment. The lecture repays study still delivered as it is by a man of wide experience who enjoyed a reputation for high integrity when he was a civil servant. That it was delivered in honour of the late Mr. G. L. Mehta who was deservedly respected for personal integrity invests it with added appeal.

"An uncomfortably large number of politicians and ministers are corrupt. Corruption is universal in the lower ranks of the public services; it has affected the middle ranks as well and is now infecting the apex of our administrative structure—the All India services—who used at one time to be, like Caesar's wife, wholly above suspicion". None can contest this assessment nor with it the tacit suggestion that it is the minister and the politician who has corrupted the civil servant and not the other way round.

Mr. Nehru discusses the causes of this degeneration and ascribes it largely to the fact that "our exposure to wealth is so new". That is a facile assumption. The truth is that it was the exposure to political power which was new. Those who wielded that power in the early years after independence was attained did nothing to curb corruption. The way Krishna Menon and T.T.K. were allowed to get away and the obvious and extreme reluctance with which inquiries were instituted against Kairon and Malaviya could not have failed to provide certain lessons to the corrupt. They learnt that obedience to the leader helps you to get away with blue murder.

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The advertisement features a man in profile, facing left, wearing a dark suit jacket over a patterned shirt. He is holding a shotgun in his right hand, pointing it upwards. The background is a grid pattern. To the right of the man, the text "THE CRACK SHOT" is written vertically in large, bold, sans-serif letters. Below this, a smaller text block reads: "The Bombay Dyeing Man is here with a wide range of suiting to choose from". A bulleted list follows: • BULLET • SUPERTEX • MODERATA • FILAWEFT • TRIGGER. At the bottom right, the brand name "WADRENE" is written above "POLYESTER SUITINGS". The bottom section contains the large text "BOMBAY DYEING" with a small logo of a stylized figure next to the letter "G". Below this, a smaller line of text reads: "Watch OUR MAN in the film 'The Troubleshooter'".

Mr. Nehru holds that "the principal reason why we are corrupt is the political system we have adopted which cannot exist without large scale expenditure of money". Is this not a case of bad craftsmen quarrelling with the tools? One is tempted to paraphrase the devastating retort Motilal Nehru once gave to Gandhiji, quoting Hafiz. "It is not wine which makes men disreputable. It is men who have brought wine into disrepute." It is not the system which has corrupted the honest Indian; it is the dishonest Indian who has corrupted the political system. The Indian, to be sure, is not less honest than any other mortal. But when he acquired power without the traditions, norms and restricting conventions of political morality he tended, as any mortal in his place would have, to go berserk. The leadership should have kept the rank and file under strict check. It failed and the deterioration set in.

Mr. Nehru's description of the role of money in elections is faultless. So, also, his analysis of its consequences. Greshan's law has wreaked its havoc. So much so that, as he points out, "in one particular state no less than 30% of the legislators are involved in criminal cases of one type or another".

Pleading for a "moral revolution" can deteriorate into sheer escapism. But Mr. Nehru can hardly be expected to pinpoint the cause of the steep decline. It is the fierce struggle for power launched since 1969 by one who has a contempt for rules which ensure fairplay. Before Mrs. Indira Gandhi there were not angels who strode across the land. Some of her opponents were more rapacious than sharks. But there was at all hands a certain adherence to the basics of the game; the rules of the system. She broke them systematically. The techniques of fund-raising were not terribly novel. Kidwai used them cynically as the Nehru-Patel correspondence in 1950 reveals. Mrs. Gandhi perfected the techniques for the 1971 election.

How did she get away with it? Because public opinion was none to alert or assertive, partly. But very largely because of our failure to evolve a viable political party system as even neighbouring Sri Lanka has done. It was not the flaw in the system but the weakness of the opposition and the lack of credibility of S. K. Patils, Atulya Ghoshes and Nijalingappas galore that facilitated Mrs. Gandhi's path to total power through reckless disregard of all the rules.

Mr. Nehru will call all this partisan staff. So, leave it aside and proceed to his prescription. He advocates a "root and branch reform" of the Constitution.

The first reform would be to provide for indirect elections in three stages to the state legislatures and four to Parliament. At the base of the tier will be the panchayat or the local body in the towns. The next tier will be the Zilla Parishad or the District Boards. These will elect members to the state legislature which will, in turn, elect members of Parliament.

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Mr. Nehru insists that at all four stages proportional representation will govern the elections. But if only proportional representation is properly or suitably engrafted to our present system much of the vice of corruption will be checked. Mr. Nehru's formula is akin to Ayub Khan's basic democracy panacea. Members of local bodies will be wooed by aspiring MPs for their votes, rest assured, and wooed through wads of currency notes. Money will be spent in four stages but spent all the same.

Nor is there any reason to believe that separating the legislature from the executive will conduce to stability. The executive will still have to solicit the legislator's support to secure the passage of its legislation and its budget. In the U.S. bipartisanship and tradition ensure that deadlocks are resolved. One cannot be too hopeful that such a system will work here. Besides, even with accountability to Parliament the executive is insensitive. Witness Mrs. Gandhi's attitude on the Antulay affair. To make the executive unaccountable to the legislature is to ensure autocracy.

In truth, Mr. Nehru's justified contempt for the Indian politician has driven him to dislike the political process itself. Hence these mechanical changes. But as Prof. Bernard Crick points out in his excellent book "In Defence of Politics", politics is a game of free men and its existence is a test of freedom. No wonder Ayub Khan and Franco hated politics.

The prime defect lies in the Indian political party system—the failure to evolve viable alternatives with the result that the ruling party becomes despotic and the opposition, irresponsible. A Constitution rests on the balance of political forces. In India the balance is at best precarious. Hence the collapse of the system in June 1975.

Mr. Nehru deserves full praise for his advocacy of reforms to ensure the autonomy of the civil services and the independence of the judiciary; civil servants, he suggests, should be transferred not by ministers but only by a group of civil servants themselves.

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There could, in fact, be no greater contribution to the cause of ordered progress in this country than a determined effort to reduce corruption considerably throughout the governmental apparatus, and to eliminate it altogether in the higher political and official ranks. There has in the past been ample discussion of the ways of doing this. Two things at least are essential, the elimination of the financial dependence of the major political party on business and the evolution of a method of investigation of *prima facie* allegations against those in power, however high. An organisation like the Congress ought to depend for its funds not on *ad hoc* contributions from a few rich men but on regular subscriptions from a large number of supporting members. If a countrywide party of this popularity and prestige were to make a real effort, it ought not to find it difficult to enrol 20 lakhs of members, each of whom would be prepared to pay 6 rupees a year. Its annual income would thus be a crore and twenty lakhs, which would enable the building up of a fund of about 5 crores for election purposes, after allowing 20 lakhs a year for expenses. The enrolment of these members and collection of their subscription would also give an opportunity for the growth of a cadre of real workers in touch with the people and cognizant of their grievances.

The investigation of *prima facie* allegations against high political personages could be undertaken by a specially appointed independent tribunal, competent to compel the attendance of witnesses, the production of papers and the taking of evidence on oath. Ministers could with all propriety be asked to appear before such a tribunal, and it is probable that after two or three investigations of this nature, the general standard of ministerial behaviour would begin to be such as to give little ground for suspicion. It could also with advantage be laid down that all contracts, trade transactions, permits or licences between Government and private parties in which any relative of a Minister was concerned should be reported to Parliament or the State legislature.

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