

WHEN I moved to my present flat in Lajpat Nagar, I was distressed to find that the central square in my block, originally designated as a park, was being used as a garbage dump. Many people from a neighbouring slum would even come and defecate in it. The tap supposedly meant for watering the non-existent garden in the supposed park had a broken faucet. The water gushed out intermittently all day, leaving huge pools of stagnant water. Stray cows came to quench their thirst and rest in the puddles. In the morning several poor labourers from the vicinity used this bountiful flow of water as an open air bathing place. The whole place stank and in certain seasons became a breeding ground for mosquitoes.

Several residents complained to local municipal authorities against this abuse of our public space, but to no avail. Finally, some residents decided to take the matter into their own hands and develop the area into a proper park using their own collective resources and initiative. Within no time thousands of rupees were collected as an initial fund. Each family subsequently paid Rs 30-50 per month. A few residents did not cooperate and refused to pay. But on the whole, the enthusiasm level was high. We hired a private *maali*, bought a pump for our own regular supply of water, and a lot of plants. We simply took charge of the upkeep of the park.

Suddenly, a whole army of corporation officials descended on us, including the official *maali*, supposedly responsible for the upkeep of this particular park. We had never seen him before. We were told that by creating a park we were “encroaching” on DDA land, that we had no right to hire *gardeners* for our park. It was not our property. It was government property and its maintenance was the job of the government! Naive residents like me

‘Naukri’ As Property

Causes and Cures for Corruption in Government

Madhu Kishwar

were outraged. However, wiser heads prevailed. They had understood the message correctly — these employees and their superiors wanted to be paid off for allowing us the privilege of doing the job they were hired to do.

They were well aware that nobody in the government ever loses a job for not doing any work, especially if in the files a reasonable amount of paper work has been duly entered, salaries are regularly withdrawn and money spent on various officially sanctioned works. However, if these *naukri wallahs* (job holders) had to officially acknowledge that the civic jobs they are responsible for are being done by others, were actually arranged for by citizens without any help or support from the Corporation and its workers, they would have no rationale for holding on to their jobs. Therefore, they interpreted our creation of the park as a coup of sorts — an

anti-government activity — and so seemed determined to obstruct our functioning in every possible way.

The wise ones in our Residents’ Association, however, understood what was really at stake and worked out a deal with the *maalis* and their supervisor. The association would pay them a certain monthly amount plus a bottle of liquor every month just for keeping off our backs, and for letting us develop and take care of the public park with our own money. Our Residents’ Association incharge also assured them that we would never raise the issue of their dereliction of duty or complain against them.

As soon as the space started to respond to our efforts and began to look like a pleasant pocket park, the Corporation officials unilaterally declared it an “ornamental” park. This special status was bestowed on it for a



Our neighbourhood park maintained by local residents

purpose. According to Corporation rules, in ordinary local parks, residents are allowed to hold marriages and other similar functions by paying a fee (and a bribe) to the Corporation. However, in an ornamental park local residents are not supposed to be allowed to hold any private functions. Our non-ornamental park space for years had been intermittently cleared of its rubbish for holding marriages and other functions, especially since the government owned local community hall meant for such purposes had been taken over several years ago by encroachers with full help from the government, under the garb of setting up a refugee camp for Kashmiri migrants. (There is hardly a Kashmiri family there now. But those who are in possession of the hall cannot be asked to vacate for obvious political reasons). Therefore, the declaration that our local park could no more be used as a venue for residents' family functions, even if they paid for cleaning up and restoration work after each function, upset many residents. They began petitioning and pressuring for the relaxation of this rule. Thanks to the perseverance of an active and influential political worker in our neighbourhood, permission began to be given on a case to case basis.

But we well know that every government "don't" implies a larger price tag for creating an exception. In effect, as a result of reclassifying the space into an "ornamental park", the bribe rate for getting permission for holding marriages or other functions went up substantially. But that is not all. We also discovered, to our shock and amazement, that Corporation officials have been withdrawing approximately Rs 70,000 every quarter from the Corporation funds to "maintain" this ornamental park! They did provide us four benches and some lights as a token of their involvement. But in the government records they claim to have developed the park all by their own



A corporation controlled space meant for a park in Lajpat Nagar — strewn with garbage and used as an open latrine.

efforts and initiative. We are also informed that the Corporation employees have similarly pocketed a huge sum for a bore well, which the residents themselves actually bought and installed with their own money, as well as for ostensibly providing all kinds of facilities in the park, for working overtime on it, and for similar imaginary activities.

This story would be laughed off as a fantasy, an unbelievable farce in many parts of the world. But in our country, we have come to accept such situations as routine. They cause neither surprise nor indignation. Our local Corporation babus and *maalis* are merely emulating what is being systematically practised at every level of the supposedly "organised" sector of

our economy.

License to Loot

The moral of the story: a government job in our country does not involve any responsibility to work because such a job is treated as property. It gives you an official licence to extort money, to grab public property, to embezzle public funds. In addition, you get a lifelong salary and even a pension after you retire for having done nothing except move files at a snail's pace, or block their movement, harass the public, hide information from the people, and devise ways to siphon off public funds.

Actually, if the government employees did nothing, that would be a blessing. It would work out better for the rest of us if they collected their salaries and just stayed at home and let people fend for themselves. However, as things operate now, the ownership of their jobs entitles them to legally obstruct people who try to get our public facilities to function. They have an unchallenged right to make a nuisance of themselves, and to harass citizens. That is where their real income comes from. Their salaries are a mere licence fee which the government pays

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its employees to confer on them the right to make the life of citizens as difficult as possible so that they do not forget the power and might of our *mai-baap sarkar*.

Here is an example far more sinister than the one quoted above. We are all familiar with the sight of men, women and children from poor families picking through garbage outside private houses and on the streets as well as from municipal garbage dumps. According to reliable estimates two thirds of the city's garbage is collected, sorted and sold to scrap dealers by hard working poor people who are actually doing at their own cost and using their own labour to do the work that Corporation employees and officials receive regular salaries for doing. However, very few of us know that the Corporation employees are not content at letting these people be even though they do much of their work for them for free. They actually collect a fee from these garbage pickers in return for letting them take away the city's refuse at their own cost. The logic is simple: garbage pickers are eking out a living from collecting and recycling garbage; Corporation officials treat whatever is in the garbage as their own property as soon as it yields a return, though they shirk garbage handling as it is a burdensome and sickening task. Therefore, they demand a regular commission from the garbage pickers, much in the same way that a person leasing out property expects rent.

For instance, I found out that in a nearby market, shopkeepers have made a private arrangement with certain cycle cart pullers to get the day's garbage collected and taken to municipal dumps because the Corporation does not perform this task nor has it made any other arrangements for garbage removal. The municipal employees who are supposed to do this job charge a fixed fee for every cartload from these *rickshaw wallahs* for per-

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mission to dispose of the garbage. A large number of sanitation employees in Delhi appear on the work scene *only* to make these daily or weekly collections, a good part of which goes to their bosses. They beat up and harass



A garbage picker in Delhi : doing the corporation's job.

garbage pickers every now and then just to keep them frightened and insecure. The police, for their own mercenary reasons, join in to tyrannise and beat them and, at times, even put them in the lock-up on trumped up charges and extort additional payoffs. Go to any garbage pickers' slum and you will hear tale after tale of how they are beaten, arrested on trumped up charges, put into the police lock up and freed only when they agree to pay up whatever sum the police demands of them.

Even at the level of "humble" municipal sweepers, many are known to

have leased out their jobs to other people who are willing to do their work for a pittance. A sweeper who draws approximately Rs 2,300 per month often hires someone for as little as Rs 500 per month for that work so that the *naukri* owner can spend his time elsewhere in more remunerative occupations. The supervisors, whose job it is to check, get a percentage cut so that they too shut their eyes to such frauds. If by chance, some sincere enthusiastic official were to try and fire an employee who regularly evades work, the sweepers would be sure to inundate the city with garbage by going on an indefinite strike till the employee is re-

instated.

Employees of the electricity, water and telephone departments are likewise known to openly use their duty hours for doing private jobs while they neglect their official duty. Yet, if one were to be fired, the unions would bring the entire department to a complete halt to protect such an employee from "victimisation."

Similarly, Doordarshan and All India Radio have many employees who are collecting their salary while at the same time doing work for private channels, or who have set up their own

businesses while being on the government payroll. Many show up only once a month to sign the attendance register and to pass on a certain percentage from their salaries to their bosses for letting them retain their *naukri* lifelong while doing real jobs elsewhere. Not one person has ever been fired for this racket. Many of those who actually work for Doordarshan have also converted those jobs into a business: they get a percentage as their cut for any programme they sanction, and for every bill they pass. Very few private producers who work for Doordarshan escape this extortion.

That this mentality of *naukri* as property has come to pervade the entire government was eloquently brought home by the recent Air Traffic Controller's (ATC) strike. As per newspaper reports, a senior level ATC was suspended from his job after it was discovered that carelessness or a lapse on his part nearly led to a major air disaster. Hundreds of people could have been killed if the pilots of the planes had not saved the situation by handling this emergency in a few split seconds. Yet, the mere act of ordering a temporary suspension pending an investigation provoked a total lightning strike by the ATC union all over the country demanding unconditional reinstatement of the employee under suspension. The entire air traffic in India ground to halt for three-four days, inconveniencing lakhs of passengers. No other government worth its name would have succumbed to such crude blackmail but ours did because the entire bureaucracy and the political class have come to believe that a government job is indeed the most inviolate form of private property.

Naukris on Sale

No wonder that many of these *naukris* and postings are actually purchased exactly in the same way as one would buy a piece of property. The

going rate for a postman's or peon's job is Rs 40,000-50,000; a school teacher's job in many states can be bought for to Rs 1 lakh or more; a policeman's job at the lowest level costs a couple of lakhs. All *sarkari naukris*, at the lower levels, have fixed rates. So also with transfers: a Regional Transport Officer's posting at a lucrative highway could cost anything from Rs 5 - Rs 20 lakh. To get posted as an SHO to a rich business district like Karol Bagh or to a red light area like G.B. Road, police officers are known to pay several lakhs as bribes to their own bosses. Appointments, postings and transfers are in fact a big industry — with politicians and bureaucrats routinely making crores of rupees from it. If one were to audit a senior bureaucrat's or a chief minister's working day, one is likely to find that 90 per cent of their workload pertains to handling these job auctions and transfer deals.

When Indira Gandhi amended the Constitution during the Emergency to eliminate the right to private property from among the list of fundamental rights of citizens, our progressive intelligentsia hailed it as yet another step towards an egalitarian social order. Similarly, when land ceiling laws were enacted during the heydays of Nehruvian socialism giving the state

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unregulated power to take over anyone's supposedly surplus land at will, the only complaint these intellectuals made was that the laws were not being applied stringently enough.

The Land Acquisition Act — a hangover from our colonial days — has given the government the right to snatch away vast tracts of land at throwaway prices (not always paid in reality) and uproot hundreds of millions of farmers from their villages by a mere administrative order with very little redress available to those who are thus being robbed of both their homes and means of livelihood. However, the entire might of the Indian state cannot risk taking away the job of one sweeper, one ATC, one *sarkari babu* or one government doctor, teacher or pilot — no matter how gross their dereliction of duty! The understanding is that once you have secured a foothold in a *sarkari* job by hook or crook no one can take away this sacred gift from you, even if in the process the government ends up bankrupt and the entire economy is ruined.

In the early 1990s government, under threat of bankruptcy, announced that it would reduce the size of our overbloomed bureaucracy by cutting down on government jobs and closing down loss making public sector undertakings (PSUs). However, several years later, jobs have still not been cut — instead, thousands of employees have been added. PSUs, including those that are performing disastrously, have not been freed from government control.

Causing Bankruptcy

In 1994-95 alone, the central government subsidised 246 PSUs (not counting the numerous state government run PSUs) to the extent of Rs 4667 crore. Their losses are mounting every year. Paying the salaries and perks of lakhs of job holders in bankrupt enterprises have thus become a financial

millstone choking the entire economy. The PSUs really exist not to provide any product or service but simply to provide salaries and loot for *naukri* holders and their *sarkari* patrons.

No matter how poorly run the services provided by a government organisation, the employee salaries and perks keep increasing to keep up with the *naukri* owners expectation of constant improvements in their standard of living along with their increased seniority in their job. For example, our government run airlines may be bankrupted due to the inefficiency, incompetence, fraud and corruption of those who run and work in them, but the salaries of their pilots, engineers, and managers must keep increasing. It indeed requires some cheek for our airline managers and pilots to go on strikes to demand that their remuneration be at par with that provided by international airlines when their performance standards are so far below those of other airlines that the only sensible thing to do with these airlines would be to close them down.

Due to malfeasance and incompetence, a recently built bridge may collapse, causing the deaths of hundreds of people, a dam built to last 40 years may silt up in five years or collapse in two, causing havoc, death and ruination for lakhs of people; yet, such is the power of our babudom that barring a few days of suspension, no action will ever be taken against the guilty.

Govt. Monopolies

The nuisance value of these *naukri wallahs* arises from the fact that they have a monopoly. Even where the government allows private operations and enterprise, it is well controlled through the licence-permit-quota system with enormous arbitrary powers to grant or deny permits and licences in the hands of the officialdom. Such a system can only result in vast corruption, espe-



cially as it also officially allows those in power to put a veil of secrecy over all their misdoings.

Even when our government enacts the drama of liberalisation, it effectively keeps its monopoly intact — for that is the key to corruption. In the power sector, for example, foreign firms are being invited to generate electricity but the monopoly of distribution stays with the state electricity boards. Thus, as far as the consumer is concerned, we would still have to deal with the same old evil deities. In the telecom sector, only one company is being allowed to operate in one geographical zone after paying an unrealistically exorbitant fee to the telecom ministry. This would ensure that the *sarkari* telephone system would have no real competition. The two could enter into a deal whereby they join hands to maintain the existing low standards. Also it would be easy to arm twist a lone company whose continuation in the business would depend on the goodwill of the *mai-baap sarkar*.

When our bureaucrats and ministers in charge of telecom claim the right to charge crores of rupees for “granting” telecom licences in select circles to those companies willing to oblige them with suitcases full of currency

notes, (or better still hefty amounts deposited in foreign accounts) and denying them to all others who do not meet their terms and conditions, what does it all actually amount to? They are auctioning in small doses the right to do the job which our *sarkari* telecom department failed to do in all these decades while retaining their power to squeeze out the largest possible cuts and bribes despite the facade of liberalisation. Instead of citizens demanding that the telecom ministry be shut down for being such a disaster, there are many in this country who endorse its right to obstruct citizens from getting an efficient, functioning telephone from whoever is willing to provide the service at a competitive and affordable price. Why should this right to select and reject companies vest in our babus and netas anyway? Why should it not be left to an independent regulatory system that would benefit the people rather than the *babus*? Why should the Department of Telecommunications be allowed to “earn” and loot thousands of crores as licence fee and bribes from private telecom companies, thereby making telecom services far more expensive than they need be if the government were good enough to just

move out of the way ? Whose interests are they protecting by acting as licensees except that of the *naukri wallahs*, the army of *babus* who provide us with the worst telecom system in the world, and the *netas* who preside over this inefficient system as deities of corruption? To defend the existing system in the name of *swadeshi* is to make a mockery of the concept.

Artificial Scarcities

This system of *naukri raj* thrives on creating artificial scarcities. Anything our *sarkar* brings under its control and “management” automatically becomes scarce — water, trees, electricity, fuel, gas, telephones, housing, land, and whatever else they can hold as a monopoly. When new competitive private companies offer to provide fully functioning telephones to every person on demand within a year or two of their setting up operation, they are perceived as a big threat by our telecom ministers and *naukri* holders, because under such conditions our incompetent *sarkari* telephone departments without a monopoly would go broke and their employees inevitably lose their jobs and thereby lose their means of collecting vast bribes.

The *naukri* owners would not even be content if they were assured of employment at comparable or even higher pay in the private sector in exchange for closing down these *sarkari* outfits, because their extortion power would have been snatched with the end of monopoly, poor service and artificially created scarcity. So desperate are the *babus* to keep the culture of scarcity alive that our petroleum ministry prefers to burn hundreds of thousands of tonnes of gas every month at Bombay High rather than let it be used and distributed by private companies as fuel in India. This when our country is facing a grim fuel crisis.

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mind technology imports because apart from earning commission and cuts on every import deal, they know the management genius of our *swadeshi naukarshahi* can make the best and the worst technology perform at par — make it dysfunctional and become part of the rot. But they resist the entry of competitive companies because they know that they will be redundant as soon as things start functioning.

Parasitic Naukarshahi

The ideology of *naukri raj* is leading to economic breakdown, civic chaos and all pervasive criminalisation of our society because it subverts the very purposes for which public institutions were created. Our hospitals function as if they were set up to provide jobs to doctors rather than to treat and cure sick people: our primary schools seem to exist solely for the purpose of providing ever increasing salaries to ever more teachers who seldom if ever teach rather than cater to the educational needs of students. Industries departments and ministries are created so that officials can obstruct the efficient functioning of industries and collect money by harassment. Public sector units are not allowed to be closed down even if they are incurring thousands of crores in losses every

single year just so that a few ministers and lakhs of *babus* and *naukri wallahs* can go on parasiting on the system.

The neo-*swadeshi* mongers claim that allowing private, especially foreign, companies into India will compromise our national security and create unemployment. In fact they are defending a system whereby a few lakh *sarkari naukri wallahs* are allowed to hold the entire society to ransom, a system whereby government has come to resemble a vast, organised extortion racket — and nothing else. They oppose the dismantling of government monopolies using the specious plea that competitive privatisation will mean surrendering to the greed and exploitation inherent in the capitalist market system.

They obviously prefer a system whereby every citizen has to feed the greed and power mania of *babus* and *netas* who control the *sarkari* machine. They parasite on and humiliate the rest of the people in this country, reducing us all to the status of colonial subjects. Think of the way even the supposedly mighty Tatas and Birlas cringe and crawl to placate every petty official in every ministry they have to deal with. Our “big bourgeoisie” has to organise “public relations departments” and armies of liason officers in order to offer *salaamis* to and grease the palms of every *sarkari* representative from the *peon* to the ministers and their secretaries.

In actual fact, a *sarkari* mode of privatised loot and plunder has already been in operation for many years — indeed, leftist rhetoric has helped provide a large fig leaf for this process. For instance, if you want a water or electricity connection, you don’t just walk into a government office, fill out a form, deposit a fee and get the connection. You look for a tout who will charge you a fee to identify the right palms to grease inside those govern-

ment offices for the sanction to come through. This is the most venal form of privatisation because government employees are using a state monopoly for private gain, and you have no other option. Our electricity departments are in the red because the employees are privately selling electricity by providing more illegal connections than legal ones. Their inspectors will happily tamper with meters and lower your bills in return for a fee. A consumer who has been charged a fraudulently exorbitant bill dare not refuse to pay up because they will have his/her telephone or electricity connection cut off altogether. It will take months or even years to get it restored and that too only after these *sarkari thugs* have been propitiated with all kinds of offerings.

In our *naukri raj*, if there is a power breakdown, it doesn't mean those in charge of running that electricity station will be called to account. Far from it. What actually happens is that enterprises or farmers in that area whose production is affected by that power breakdown will come, plead, grovel and beg before the *bijli babus* and pay them whatever they demand in order to get them to restore the power supply as soon as possible.

Sarkaris Socialism

Our *sarkari* version of socialism thus amounts to providing state protection and government space for allowing its employees to carry out self-serving personal deals with resources paid for by the people, and making government offices commission collection centres for politicians, employees and managers who have been provided with every possible incentive to keep things dysfunc-

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tional, to promote inefficiency and breakdown. This is the kind of extortion racket our *sarkari* leftists wish to defend by keeping intact the state monopoly in key sectors of our economy.

Every time some enthusiastic bureaucrat talks of making the laws more

strict and calls for a rigorous implementation of the law to prevent misuse and theft, the attempt usually brings in a bigger bonanza for the *naukarshahi*. For instance, when Mr Tejinder Khanna took over as Lt Governor of Delhi last year he took up the challenge of removing unauthorised constructions and encroachments over public land. A special task force was set up for the purpose of carrying out demolitions. A few high profile buildings were indeed demolished to show our *babus* meant business and a few of those among the government engineers who had connived in the illegal construction were temporarily transferred to other posts. For a few days the demolition squads went around making a pretense of breaking down illegal constructions: a few theatrical hammers were duly photographed for the media coverage and for government records. All this provided an opportunity to collect another round of bribes from the building owners. Net result: the overall bribe rate for illegal construction has gone up considerably in Delhi.

Encouraging Crime

The assumption behind creating the special task force was that the law-breaking public ought to be punished. However, anyone who has had anything whatsoever to do with any kind of building — from a *jhuggi* to a palace — knows that the *sarkari babus* will not let you proceed an inch unless they have been propitiated first. Anyone who wants to build lawfully — that is, follow the building laws faithfully, would be harassed beyond all limit. You simply cannot get such a plan sanctioned. The *babus* want you to, in fact they



Bribe Bonanza : The top floor balcony broken for "show". One of the many buildings in Delhi which has flouted all building laws. Its covered area is four times the legally permissible limit. It has even taken over part of the road.

encourage you to, flout the laws because that will bring them more money. The amount the engineers and sanctioning clerks can extract out of a person depends on to what extent the rules are being flouted. Therefore, they themselves encourage people to undertake illegal construction, and to occupy public land.

In recent years, the Corporation engineers have started moving around with hired *goondas* in order to facilitate the task of extortion from city builders. *The Indian Express* of June 11, 1997 reported that “with salaries not more than Rs 7,000 a month, junior engineers in Delhi pay between 15,000 to Rs 20,000 a month plus one percent share for their protection”. Deepak Datwal, the MCD junior engineer who was recently arrested for the murder of his boss R.P. Singh confessed to the police that he was paying his bodyguard Rs 80,000 a month. The bodyguard in turn had three more *goondas* on his payroll solely to protect Datwal. The lucrative protection business has attracted a large number of unemployed youth from Delhi’s villages. Armed with long knives and country made revolvers, they threaten the builders when they don’t pay up. At times sophisticated weapons are arranged for by the Uttar Pradesh mafia dons. There are times when the junior engineers are paid but they fail to get the builder’s work done. As no legal records are kept of the payments, builders send their goons to teach the junior engineers a lesson. In such situations, hired bodyguards come in handy. Datwal claims to have got his boss murdered because the latter was beginning to make excessive monetary demands — that is, demands for a higher cut from the booty Datwal collected. The money collected per building ranges from a lakh to several crores. A number of murders have taken place in recent years because of conflicts over sharing of bribes.

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Corrupt & Incompetent

What we are facing today is not merely organised corruption in government but something far more deadly — plain and thoughtless criminal appropriation of public funds without restraint. Our *netas* and *babus* in fact feel persecuted if this right is challenged as the behaviour of the Sukh Rams, Laloo Yadavs testify. There are numerous examples of societies with a fairly high level of corruption. Yet they have not become as dysfunctional. Their governments manage to perform many of the essential public tasks with a measure of responsibility. Take the case of Malaysia. There too people

have come to take it for granted that politicians and bureaucrats will pocket a certain percentage by way of cuts and bribes in any government sponsored project. Yet it is one of the booming economies of Asia today. It has a relatively developed and functioning infrastructure, far better civic amenities, and provides substantially better health care and education to most of its citizens than does India. The difference is that the political and bureaucratic leadership in Malaysia has a longer term vision beyond loot and plunder and a worked out programme of actions that can lead their whole society to a better life. They have aspirations to lead their entire society to prosperity — not just to amass personal wealth. Therefore, if a road is to be built, those in charge will make a good deal of money out of it, but they will also have built a relatively decent road as well. However, in India, the money is likely to be pocketed without any trace of a road or at best a road of such poor quality that it won’t last two months. We are in a hopeless mess because our bureaucrats are not just corrupt — they are also hopelessly incompetent. Over these years they have developed hardly any skills or training for doing anything but steal-



A newly "built" road in South Delhi

ing public money.

On a recent visit to Batala in Punjab, I saw large parts of the town dug up to resemble a vast disorganised chaos. My friends in that town narrated how they had gone in a deputation to the Deputy Commissioner requesting him to first finish constructing the already dug up roads before the Corporation dug up more. Without a hint of shame the DC explained his operation thus: "The government has just released several crores of rupees for road works in this area. Who knows how long my posting will last? I may be transferred in two-three months. I want to make sure that I have spent the entire amount before that." Mindless digging was indeed the quickest and the easiest way of spending and siphoning off a large percentage of the money whereas building a road would take planning across a wide variety of *naukri wallahs*, and lots of time and effort, as well as reduce the amount *naukri wallahs* could pocket.

Thus the *naukri raj* is criminalising our society, sapping the vitality of our economy and destroying whatever base we might begin to construct for developing a sense of responsible citizenship, a public morality. The concentration of crooks, pimps and thugs is highest in and around government offices. From *naukri* as property we have now come to a stage where those who hold government jobs have come to believe that public money put under their charge is actually there only so that they can find ways of channelling the money into their personal accounts. Rajiv Gandhi as prime minister had openly admitted in the mid 80s that no more than 15 per cent of the government money ever reaches where it is meant to go. Today, the figure would be close five to eight per cent. That too is spent inefficiently. When one reads reports of so many crores of rupees lying unspent under this or that head in a government department, what



Digging without end : A lucrative business for *naukarshahi*

this in effect means is that the *naukarshahi* has not yet found ways of siphoning off those funds. Only such projects are undertaken, only such dams or roads begun, which provide for large scale loot and plunder.

The nuisance value of our *naukarshahi* has grown by leaps and bounds also because it has bloated magnificently in post-Independence India. The British were here to make money so they were careful about how much they spent on administration. Our *naukarshahi* by making *naukri*-holding a lucrative business has gone on expanding recklessly. For instance, the number of Central Government employees has increased from 14.4 lakhs in 1948 to 38.7 lakhs in 1997.

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While the number of secretaries in various ministries has increased from 8 to 92 in the same period. Our jumbo ministries attract criticism, but gargantuan bureaucracy goes unnoticed because the *babus* remain faceless. Agriculture is a state subject and yet the Agriculture Ministry in Delhi which has no rationale to exist has 11,738 employees. Information and Broadcasting Ministry whose only function is to block information flows and hamper the functioning of Doordarshan and All India Radio has a strength of 59,155.

Obstructions Pay

The less they do, the more they obstruct, the more money they want. The bureaucracy has just given itself a massive salary hike which is estimated to add Rs 40,000 crore to central and state government's expenditure. The Pay Commission which recommended the salary increase has also recommended cutting down the size of the bureaucracy by a third. Needless to say the pay hike has been implemented but the downsizing of the bureaucracy rejected.

Private Sector Mess

This culture of *naukri* as property also permeates the private organised

sector. Our tax, company and labour laws and their implementation are so perverse that they make it virtually impossible for an industrial employer in the organised sector to operate a business according to their strictures without losing vast sums of money every year. In order for most organised sector firms to survive, they demand and receive hefty hidden and explicit subsidies from the government, they refuse to undertake production unless the government protects them from real competition, they see to it that there is a guaranteed market for whatever they produce, however shoddy and obsolete the goods that they may produce, however inefficiently they operate. In a practical sense, there is little competition among the major firms in the organised sector. Much of our industrial plants that turn out our capital and consumer goods are more than a generation behind ordinary (not cutting edge) work organisation practices and product technology easily available in most of the rest of the world, and falling farther and farther behind every day. On top of all these deficiencies, the political impossibility of working out a viable exit policy for those firms that, even with all these protections, are actually bankrupt, makes all parts of the economy totally dependent on the *sarkar*.

Many in the small scale sector avoid increasing their workforce, avoid making the transition to the scale of the organised sector, though they have the capital and technology available to them to scale up, just to escape figuring in the government records and coming under the evil gaze of the tax and labour officials. They don't want to grow big and be noticed by the *sarkar* because they will no longer be competitive if they are required to follow the same rules as the organised sector firms. Thus, even though our workers in the informal sectors are paid so little and produce an enormous but

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little recognised proportion of the national product, our infrastructural industries that are monopolised by the organised sector hog our national resources but nevertheless remain backward in terms of technology, product quality and organisational skills.

Privatising Desi Style

In recent years an active lobby has emerged which advocates liberalisation and privatisation as the panacea for all the ills of our non-functioning non-competitive economy. However, whatever little we have seen of attempts to encourage large scale private enterprise in the Indian context has not proved much of a boon even to the consumer so far. Businessmen function responsibly only in those societies where the government also functions somewhat competently and rationally. It must have some larger sense of strategy beyond blind loot and plunder. It must ensure that as liberalisation begins and grows well functioning independent and rational regulatory controls are put into place to supplement the disciplines of the market and to mediate conflicting claims — as well as to call to account those whose short term greed attempts to undermine the market.

While no reforms will remove the entire burden of crookedness and corruption from any society, many countries in the world that were once as poor as India have shown that it is possible to reduce the scale of loot and

plunder of the *naukri wallahs* by leaving them with less discretion and decision making authority, by making easily available the information the public needs to evaluate the performance of its government.

In our society, neither the police nor the law courts provide much protection to those whose rights are violated. Private businesses of any size tend to function only in terms of what they can get away with in the short run, however much it may harm their firm on a longer term basis; the rule of the *naukri wallahs* over generations has resulted in businessmen not believing there will be a tomorrow when they will be able to make long term decisions about profits and investment in a stable and fair competitive environment without being fleeced and trampled upon by the *naukri wallahs*.

One example will suffice. In Delhi, the state monopoly over the city buses was demolished a few years ago by opening up this sector to private operators. However, the licence-permit raj stayed intact. People were granted these private bus licenses and issued remunerative routes largely on the basis of pay offs to ministers and bureaucrats.

Overnight scores of companies and hundreds of individuals turned transporters and tried to make a quick killing by fiercely competing with each other to pick up as many passengers as they could by disregarding route designations and safety regulations.

A new system of bribes and pay-offs to the police and politicians who were supposed to control their operations let bus service resort to the type of competitiveness that is supposed to characterise the jungle. Their ill-maintained buses observe no speed or traffic rules. They hire inexperienced drivers and conductors on a commission basis to drive and operate their buses for long hours without proper shift breaks. They drive like maniacs.

They have killed and maimed thousands of people without paying penalties that would discourage them from continuing to maximise their loot in a competitive environment without any effective regulatory mechanisms. These buses are packed far beyond their capacity, making travel in them a nightmarish experience. Within a short period, these vehicles came to be known as killer buses. Despite this corruption ridden competition, they charge arbitrary fares; they have pushed up the prices of tickets far beyond what they would be in a properly functioning competitive system.

They are getting away with such irresponsible and even murderous behaviour because those in charge of overseeing their operations are so busy milking them for bribes that they need fear no sanctions. Buses are not impounded, nor permits cancelled despite repeated accidents because the police and political bosses are routinely paid off. The traffic policemen posted at different strategic points all over the city never bother to enforce speed limits provided they get their *haftas* regularly. The licensing authority are willing to sell licences without as much as the formality of a driving test so that many who take up driver's jobs have no such qualification or training. Many of the drivers are colour blind or have impaired eyesight. But the licensing authority could not care less.

Likewise, the inspector of the anti-pollution department stands on the road only to collect his dues and turn a blind eye to the poisonous fumes these ill-maintained buses belch out in lethal quantities. They are one of the gravest threats to the safety and well-being of Delhi citizens. The bus owners don't feel called upon to provide better service because they can get away with it; the government owned transport corporations that are the only other available alternative provide even poorer service and the govern-

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ment agencies encourage mismanagement by keeping various levers of control in their hands and refuse to get out of the way and allow an independent regulatory body that would encourage rational competition to come into being.

Similarly, in the health sector, private practitioners get away with fleecing patients while providing abysmally low quality services bordering on criminal neglect and wilful malpractice because the government sets very low standards in state-run hospitals. Moreover, it does not encourage and sup-

port independent regulatory bodies that would help protect the rights of medical consumers.

Setting Things Right

How do we set things right?

□ To begin with, government monopoly over essential services has to be replaced by a system of service provision that encourages competitive alternatives so that there are profit incentives for companies to provide quality services at a competitive price. There must be a system of sanctions to make service providers behave responsibly.

□ Our government servants need to be transformed into genuine public servants by giving citizens real power to understand and monitor their functioning and retain or dismiss them if they don't perform. This means replacement of the culture of life-time *naukris* with a system of jobs offered contingent on actual performance.

This restructuring process has to start at the village level because our rural population is the worst victim of



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naukarshahi's tyranny. The power to hire and fire employees — from school teachers to local police and electricity department employees — ought to rest with local *panchayats*.

□ The work of the government should be restricted to those tasks that cannot be better done on a competitive basis in the non-government sectors. Whatever jobs remain within the government should be linked to work actually done under public supervision. A *naukri* within the government should not be treated as a licence to obstruct and fleece people. Instead, to the extent feasible, incentives should be inbuilt to enhance job performance. For instance, if the salaries of our telephone employees were given or cut according to the number of telephone lines under their group's charge that they could keep in functioning order, they would have a strong personal incentive to keep the system functioning smoothly.

□ We need to frame laws in such a way that they reduce the enormous discretionary powers of our unaccountable government employees.

Today, our system bestows sweeping ill designed and ill defined powers on law enforcers to punish citizens with thousands of unenforceable laws which make law breaking the only effective way of surviving and making money. We should reverse this altogether.

Our laws should primarily target law enforcers for punishment if, under their jurisdiction, the few necessary clear and rational laws are not being correctly implemented. For example, building laws should be restructured so that they are widely known to all interested citizens, are enforceable without allowing the police or municipal officials wide discretion, and there are as few of them as are required for

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basic social health, safety and commerce. Failure to honestly implement those few clearly stated laws ought to be treated as proof of connivance with law-breakers and should merit dismissal of officials incharge of ensuring compliance.

□ The different classes of services — class I, class II, class III and IV — ought to be replaced by a system that assigns job classifications according to job functions. The current system is just another mindless continuation of the former colonial government that provided an army of peons, clerks and section heads for each class I officer. In fact we have mindlessly increased the numbers of unnecessary government employees at all levels, leading the country towards bankruptcy.

Such overstaffing and lack of clear job duties encourages irresponsibility, demoralisation of workers and obstructionism. There is no reason public officials should not deal directly with the public, type their own letters and handle their own files so that work does not have to move from table to table, room to room and clerk to clerk, at a snail's pace.

There should be a realistic time frame prescribed for every task to be performed. Failure to stick to deadlines should lead to automatic sanctions against the poor performance of the officials concerned.

□ The Official Secrets Act ought to be replaced by a Duty to Provide Information Act which would make it

mandatory for government officials to provide accurate information to the general public (without a citizen having to make any special requests or follow any difficult procedures) to learn what happens to money allotted and expenditures incurred for each activity of the government.

For instance, the officials of every municipal corporation and zilla parishad should be obliged by law to put on easily available public notice boards every month the money under their charge, where it comes from and what exactly they spent it on. Failure to do so should result in automatic suspension and even dismissal of the officials concerned. Citizen committees should have the right to check and examine the veracity of these accounts. In cases of possible fraud or misinformation, the official concerned should be automatically suspended and if a hearing demonstrates in a time limited period that he is responsible, he should be dismissed.

□ At the same time, the salaries of government employees should be increased substantially. By giving them unrealistically low salaries, the government is facilitating corruption. However, this can be feasible only if the size of the *naukarshahi* is reduced drastically which will automatically increase its efficiency and make this an affordable proposition.

□ Finally, and most importantly, while cutting down the bloated size of the government, dismantling the monopolistic *naukarshahi* and making space for a more competitive system, we need to overhaul our legal system from the bottom up so that it is actually able to provide timely and enforceable judgments to protect citizens from unscrupulous wrong doers — whether in government or in the private sector. □