

Go stand in the corner

Beauty, we all know when we look at other people's wives (and thank our stars), lies in the eyes of the beholder. Likewise, propriety lies in the minds of those who are expected to set an example by their conduct. It is also an accepted principle that not knowing the law is no excuse for breaking it. Much the same thing can be said for ensuring proper behaviour amongst public servants, elected and otherwise. That the Collector's wife takes the office car for shopping is seen by the public, but the sahib himself may claim or feign ignorance. That a finance minister's wife has fought an income tax case on behalf of the government is similar, although the degree of the impropriety is greater.

So, as expected, there was uproar in the Rajya Sabha on Monday over the revelation that Nalini Chidambaram had appeared in an income tax case on behalf of the Central Board of Direct Taxes (CBDT), which functions under the finance minister. Mrs Chidambaram has stated that the decision to take the case was hers and her husband was not aware of it. Mr Chidambaram has also said that he didn't know what his wife was doing. The CBDT has not covered itself with glory but has clarified that this is the only such case involving Mrs Chidambaram. The reason for making an exception sounds strange: if it is because Mr Chidambaram was handling the case before he became the minister in charge, it should have been all the more reason for his wife to keep a distance. Out of all this, there emerges a technical impropriety,

not skulduggery.

All sorts of allegations have been made in the House, including that Mrs Chidambaram, having lost the case, had caused revenue loss to the exchequer. These strain credulity. The AIADMK MP who brought up the subject also alleged, without evidence, that the government's loss benefited the Karpagam Mills. The Mill, it has been alleged (again without substantiation), is linked to Mr Chidambaram's brother. The Rajya Sabha chairman refused permission to discuss the matter on the grounds that no notice had been given. Now the AIADMK member has written to the Rajya Sabha chairman on the issue. The country will wait to see what happens next.

There may be people who think that Mr Chidambaram should resign. But there is extreme irony in someone like Mr Chidambaram, whose probity in public life is above reproach, being pilloried when the world of Indian politics has few who can claim his level of integrity. So a resignation for a technicality would be harsh punishment, especially because he must be given the benefit of doubt about what he actually knew. It is no argument that, true to his principles, Mr Chidambaram had quit over the Fairgrowth issue in 1993 (that too involved Mrs Chidambaram). That was a mistake and to quit now, too, would be a mistake. That said, it would also be wrong of Mr Chidambaram to stop with a plea of ignorance. Errors, whether deliberate or accidental, become more acceptable if accompanied by an apology and a promise to be more careful in the future. How about it, Sir, just a simple sorry?

Merger, he said

You have to hand it to Petroleum Minister Mani Shankar Aiyar. When he's convinced of something, he keeps at it. So, when the Synergy in Energy committee that he set up to recommend merging of the oil sector PSUs into two behemoths rejected the idea, he's now got the go-ahead to set up another committee which will consider the issue of integrating the oil PSUs all over again. On the face of it, the argument in favour of merging oil companies is a simple one. Globally, all oil majors are vertically integrated, which is to say they both drill for oil as well as process it and then sell petrol and other refined products to the end consumer. The global majors are also much larger than India's oil PSUs. So, if you merge HPCL with ONGC, for instance, the combine becomes much larger and can play in the big league (read: attempt global takeovers). Also, since the prices of crude and petroleum products move with a lag, an integrated oil company's cash flows look better.

The problem with this approach, however, is that the history of large mergers is poor, the latest high-profile disaster being the HP and Compaq merger, which finally saw Carly Fiorina lose her job. In the Indian scenario, where oil companies may not have the freedom to seek cost reductions born from synergy, the chances of failure are higher. In any case, if vertical integration is what Mr Aiyar wants, it is surprising that companies like ONGC that want to get into petrol retailing are being denied permission to do so. It is surely better for a company to grow organically than through mergers, especially ones that are being decided by politicians. It doesn't help that, when merged, the resultant oil PSUs will

make them impossible to privatise, given that the funds required to buy them will be that much greater and given also that the "national champion" argument becomes that much more powerful. Also, since the Cabinet has decided that one company in each segment of the hydrocarbon chain will remain a PSU (ONGC in oil exploration, GAIL in gas and IOC in refining-marketing), any merged company that has any of these three companies cannot be offered for privatisation.

All these aside, the real issue for consumers is increasing competition, and that is something the proposed mergers will work against. Even now, though under the direction of the government, oil companies act as a cartel and control prices. Indeed, there is little doubt that the process of fixing prices includes hefty margins for the oil firms—it is a different matter that since global oil prices are so high, these margins are inadequate, which is why the oil firms are making losses. Merging oil companies will only make this cartelisation worse. The other reason for not merging, of course, is that with the merged oil company's finances in better shape than that of the individual companies (if all goes well, that is), the government will use this as yet another excuse for not allowing oil companies the freedom to charge market-determined prices. If the merger had already taken place, for instance, and IBP was merged with ONGC, the government would find it easy to ignore the fact that IBP is going to slip into losses due to non-revision of prices, since ONGC has enough profits to cover IBP's losses. The real issues in the sector are increasing productivity and competition, and the proposed course of action is not a solution.

reputation on the line—not as the creator of a detective, but as a writer turned detective herself. She claimed to have solved the most notorious series of murders ever; she claimed she knew the identity of Jack the Ripper, the man who murdered at least seven women in the Whitechapel area; she claimed the Ripper was the painter Walter Sickert.

Over the next three years, Ripperologists tore her theory to shreds. While Cornwell had clearly spent time, money and passion on the research, her case seemed unconvincing. Though many doubted her theory about the painter, no one doubted that she believed that theory in all sincerity.

When I read *Portrait of a Killer* three years ago, I read it as a book about Jack the Ripper, and looked to see if Cornwell had actually



SPEAKING VOLUMES

Nilanjana S Roy

assembled enough evidence. It seemed to me that she was after the wrong suspect, and her case was not convincing at all, though it was passionately argued.

This week, Cornwell is back with what she says is near-conclusive evidence that will go into the revised edition of *Portrait of a Killer*. To prove her lack of obsession with Sickert, the crime

Ripped wide open: Cornwell's strange obsession



writer took out full page ads in *The Guardian* and *The Independent* that declare she isn't obsessed with him. I picked up *Portrait of a*

Killer again, realising that I had read it wrong: this was not the story of a hunt for a long-dead killer. It was a study in obsession. Many crime writers know the impulse that takes you down a cold, long-dead trail. P D James did this in *The Maud and the Pear Tree*, where she tried to exhume the story of the Ratcliffe Highway murders. She and her co-writer

set out, like Cornwell, impelled by a need to deliver a belated justice; but in the end, James conceded that she could not name the killer. The investigation was its own catharsis; she moved on.

Crime writer James Ellroy's mother was murdered when he was a child, and the killers were never found. At 32, he wrote *Clandestine*, a thinly-veiled account of his mother's murder in which he made his father the killer, even though he knew that was neither possible nor true. Then he wrote the *Black Dahlia* books, about the unsolved murder of a young girl, summing up his reasons cynically: "Boy, bereft, seizes on Black Dahlia

murder case to express the grief he never felt on the occasion of his mother's death." It would take him more years, and more books, before he found a kind of resolution.

Even Ellroy didn't display the degree of obsession that Cornwell does with Sickert. "It has always been easier for me to get angry than to show fear or loss, and I was losing my life to Walter Richard Sickert. He was taking it away from me," Cornwell wrote. At lectures, Ripper fans watched in bemusement as Cornwell's paranoia grew—she hired armed guards to protect her from possible attacks from

Ripperologists, she called anyone who cast doubts on her theories part of the "Klingon brigade".

Patricia Cornwell has one more chance, with the second edition of *Portrait of a Killer*. If she has worked out her forensic evidence, if she has made the case beyond reasonable doubt, then she'll have got what she wanted: banner headlines saying "crime novelist solves Ripper mystery". If she doesn't, and I'm betting she won't, I'll buy the book anyway, as a record of one of the strangest obsessions in literary history.

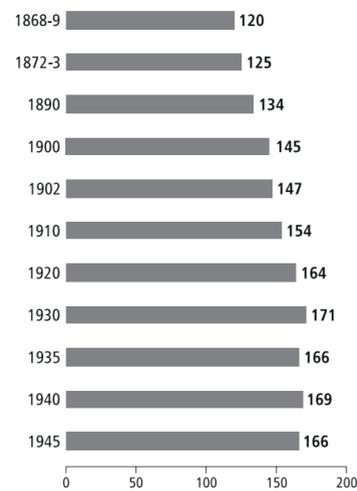
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PER CAPITA INCOME IN INDIA

(1946-47 Rs)

(Alan Heston's estimates)



Source: Lal: *The Hindu Equilibrium*, Table 6.3(a)

Illustration: BINAY SINHA

The Raj legacy: Balance sheet - I

The British Raj correctly perceived famines were due less to shortages and more to fall in people's purchasing power, says DEEPAK LAL

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's address on accepting an honorary degree at Oxford has been castigated by both the BJP and the Left for praising the British Raj. Whilst the response of the former is predictable, given its Hindutva agenda, which seeks to wipe out the memory of all of India's past foreign rulers—Muslim and British—irrespective of their positive contributions, that of the Left is more puzzling. For, more than most Indians, they are Macaulay's children (see my earlier column). The various versions of Marxism they espouse were learnt through the English language, which "of all the legacies of the Raj", the PM rightly noted, "none is more important". Their ideology is a Western ideology, however currently defunct. Their critique of the Raj cannot be based on the political and intellectual legacies of the Raj the PM rightly praised. These are "our notions of the rule of law, of a Constitutional government, of a free press, of a professional civil service, of modern universities and research laboratories", and the institutions of "our judiciary, our legal system, our bureaucracy and our police, ... derived from British-Indian administration".

So their critique must be harking back to that old nationalist (and later quasi-Marxist critique) of the economic effects of the Raj, first popularised by R C Dutt and then taken up by a host of followers. A mythology of the devastating effects of British rule on the traditional, static, subsistence economy of pre-British India was erected.

This canonical view was questioned by contemporary Indian economic historians, with the *Cambridge Economic History of India*, Vol 2, edited by Dharma Kumar providing the detailed evidence. I myself wrote a two-volume work in the 1980s questioning the factual basis of this nationalist-Marxist view. (This has now been revised, updated, and abridged into a single volume *The Hindu Equilibrium: India c 1500 BC-AD 2000*, Oxford, 2005). In this and the next column I want to summarise the economic legacy of the Raj—warts and all—based on these more recent findings, as that might help dispel the fog that still colours Indian perceptions, not least of the Left, and to show that many of the cherished beliefs of the Left are in fact part of the poisoned chalice the Raj left its successors.

First, the overall economic record

of the Raj. The PM echoed part of the nationalist critique when he stated: "that Angus Maddison has shown India's share of world income collapsed from 22.6 per cent in 1700, almost equal to Europe's share of 23.3 per cent at that time, to as low as 3.8 per cent in 1952". What he did not state was that this reflected a relative not an absolute decline in India's standard of living. Estimates made from various sources in my *In Praise of Empires* (Palgrave, 2004; Tables 4 and 1) show that in 0 AD India's per capita income at \$550 in the 1990 US \$, was higher than China's (\$450) and of the Roman Empire (\$381). Thereafter per capita income stagnated at this level till the fall of the Mughal empire in the 18th century, when it had fallen to \$533, where it remained till the second half of the Raj. Thereafter, it rose to \$673 by 1913, and kept rising till 1930 (see Table, based on Alan Heston's estimates, which gives the per capita income in rupees at the 1946-47 prices). The annual compound rate of growth of per capita income in the 60 years between 1868-69 and 1930 was 0.60 per cent. Modest compared to what independent India has achieved but which did end the millennial stagnation of

Bitter pill

MOOT POINT



PADMA PRAKASH

with giving permission for starting new colleges and for withdrawing recognition, and to act as a watchdog for maintaining standards. It currently comprises one member of the medical faculty from each university and one from each state, and seven members are elected from among registered medical practitioners. One member is nominated from each state by the central government and eight others directly from the Centre. In sum, the MCI has a broad-based representation. Or at least it should have, if the processes of constitution of members are followed efficiently.

However, the parliamentary committee's 133rd Report on *Medical Education* reported that up to June 2001, of the total MCI membership of 113, only 77 had been filled. Of the vacancies, 35 are from the elected category and 21 of these are for seats reserved for universities. The reasons given for vacancies are most peculiar, viz. non-constitution of senates/courts of the universities or because the meetings of the senate/court have not been held. Some

of these vacancies are more than 15 years old. Another reason for this non-compliance is, the committee discovered, more complicated. A number of universities now come under the newly created "Health Universities", because of which they have lost their right to be represented on the Council! Health universities apparently have no Senate, and so they cannot send representatives to the Council. So as many as 21 universities, with a large number of medical colleges, especially in the southern and western states, where the concept of Health university has taken root quite effectively, have no representation in the decision-making apex body on medical education. And here's something even more interesting: it only requires 15 members to constitute a quorum for meetings of the MCI. There is of course another reading of this situation, which is that the decisions of the MCI have little or no impact or importance really. And this is why it really does not matter whether the process of constituting the council has been completed or not.

Several issues with regard to the MCI have been hanging fire for a long time. For instance, colleges denied recognition by the MCI continue to function, the apex body's decision having been overridden by either the state or the central government or the local university. A case in point is BRD Medical College in Gorakhpur. The MCI inspected the college in 1995, took three years to communicate

to the state its decision to withdraw recognition to the college in 1998, and until 2001 there had been no move to close the college. The parliamentary committee had pointed to the urgent need for regional councils for monitoring the 183-odd medical colleges, because the state medical councils, autonomous bodies established by state governments, had no authority over or responsibility for the maintenance of standards of medical education in the state. This would, in fact, not only make for greater efficiency but for a broader base of authority that might make the autonomous institution more sensitive to external agencies, such as the health movement, demanding better regulation.

Medical education, of all the branches of professional education, is most mired in a mess of too many authorities. And because the stakes are so high, none of the authorities is willing to give up control. The unfortunate outcome of this situation is that most decisions having to do with medical education are being decided in courts.

Is the answer lumbering the state with direct quality monitoring of professional education? Is it equipped to undertake this task and be responsive to the rapid changes that are taking place in medical education the world over? Would it not be better to strengthen autonomous structures, but through legislative support and other resources, and ensure that principles of equity are not sacrificed?

"Jack the Ripper is caught," Patricia Cornwell wrote at the end of her 2002 book, *Portrait of a Killer*. "We have done it together."

Cornwell is the bestselling author of the Kay Scarpetta mystery series. There are parallels between the creator and the creation. Like Kay Scarpetta, Cornwell knows her forensic science (though her heroine outstrips her); like Scarpetta, she has considerable means; like Scarpetta, she believes that an unsolved murder is an abomination; like Scarpetta, she has battled alcoholism and come out on top. Her books are respected for the accuracy of the forensic detail, though long-time Scarpetta fans are dismayed at her increasingly tortuous plotting.

In 2002, Cornwell put her