

# A Dark Money Maze

**Inder Malhotra**

April.28 : QUICK ON the heels of the virtual explosion over the “money maze, dubious deals, and Mauritius and Dubai connection” of that shadowy combination of cricket, politics, big business and Bollywood, otherwise called the Indian Premier League (IPL), has come another depressing event that is no less alarming. It is the arrest of the president of the Medical Council of India (MCI), Ketan Desai, for allegedly demanding a bribe of Rs. 2 crores from a Punjab medical college to give it a year’s extension to run a 100-seat MBBS course. Two other men arrested at the same time are a professor of the college concerned, Dr Kanwaljit Singh, and Jitendra Pal Singh, described by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) as “the middleman”. The two Singhs were taken into custody when the professor from Punjab arrived at the Vasant Vihar house of the go-between with a sum of Rs. 2 crores packed in cardboard containers. The CBI seized the money, too.

Of course, Dr Desai has denied the charge emphatically, and pointed out that he was “nowhere near the cash”. Doubtless the “innocent-until-proved-guilty” doctrine must prevail. But the trouble is that thanks to unending judicial delays, such high-profile cases rarely, if ever, reach the stage of finality. The public and the peers of the arraigned can therefore shout themselves hoarse but to no avail. There is a pressing reason to be particularly concerned about the functioning of the MCI, the institution that regulates and thus practically runs the country’s medical education: widespread dissatisfaction with the quality of teaching in this vital area in the mushrooming private medical colleges that now number 160 out of a total of 290. Reportedly, it costs Rs 500 crores to set up a private medical college that usually sells seats for anything between Rs 25 lakhs and three times that amount.

Since the present case concerns a college in Punjab, it is relevant to record what important functionaries of the Punjab chapter of the Indian Medical Association (IMA) and other prominent members of the profession in that state are saying. All of them are already demanding a “re-inspection” of “all the private medical colleges of the country which were granted recognition during the tenure of Dr Desai”. Chairman of the in-service wing of IMA Punjab has even said: “Dr Desai’s arrest should have come long ago. A person like him should not be spared at any cost. He has jeopardised the future of a large number of students by giving accreditation to colleges that did not fulfil the requisite conditions”. According to the chairman of the Punjab Medical Services Association, Dr Hardeep Singh, the “deteriorating standard of the medical colleges opened during (Dr) Desai’s time was evident from their poor infrastructure and negligible attendance of the faculty”.

Some eminent and highly respected members of the medical profession, speaking on condition of anonymity, have claimed that no individual could have lasted for so long and functioned with impunity without at least the tacit support of the government that nominates a certain number of MCI members. Nothing should be pre-judged. But an impartial, transparent and speedy investigation into the MCI's working over the years is imperative. For, pollution of education in such sensitive spheres as medicine, engineering and science cannot but imperil the country's future.

Sadly, the current developments are of a piece with what has gone on so far. The powers that be are unwilling or unable to do anything about corruption that is not just rampant but sweeping the country like a tidal wave. Let me cite just a few very recent instances, never mind the plethora of those dating back many years and lost in the politico-administrative-judicial labyrinth. Has anyone heard a word about Madhu Koda and his Rs 4,000 crores allegedly accumulated in just two years when this lone Independent in the Jharkhand Assembly was the state's chief minister, courtesy the Indian National Congress? It is only fair to add that before changing his political allegiance, Mr Koda was minister for mining in the BJP-led Jharkhand government!

Since Mr Koda's arrest and those of his henchmen, what else have we witnessed? The Postmaster-General of Goa being arrested allegedly red-handed while accepting a huge bribe in Mumbai? In Bhopal two relatively junior IAS officers, husband and wife, were suspended after Rs. 3 crores in cash were found in their home and the CBI had estimated that the known value of their properties was Rs. 40 crores — assets disproportionate to their sources of income. This was by no means a stray example of what has come to be nicknamed "DA" (disproportionate assets) cases. A few months ago a mere inspector of Delhi Police went to jail because his assets were valued at Rs. 12 crores. But since no chargesheet was filed against him during the stipulated 60 days, he must be out on bail.

Particularly scandalous is the record of the CBI itself and the government that controls it, especially where disproportionate assets cases against powerful politicians are concerned. On April 16, the premier investigating agency had reaffirmed to the Supreme Court it had enough evidence in the case against the Uttar Pradesh chief minister, Mayawati. Exactly a week later the agency informed the apex court that it was "examining" her representation for closing the case! And consider this: In May 2009, the Indian ambassador to the United States, Meera Shankar, had written to the Union government about a number of its civilian and military officers that had accepted bribes from American companies doing business with their departments. No further proof was needed because under US laws the companies concerned had reported these tainted transactions to relevant courts. Nothing happened until October when the media raised a hue and cry. On a TV talk show Admiral (Retd) Vishnu Bhagwat declared that the Chief of the Naval Staff needed just five days to name the naval officers that had received big dollops of dollars. The Prime Minister's Office (PMO) announced

that it had ordered prompt action. It is for the PMO to explain why nothing has happened yet. The media should also feel ashamed. After shouting for a few days it has forgotten the sordid episode.