

Asian Woes

A call for a moral revolution



**SOUTH ASIAN
DRAMA:
TRAVAILS OF
MISGOVERNANCE**
By SUNDEEP WASLEKAR
Konark
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By MARK TULLY

TRAVAILS of *Misgovernance*: that subtitle attracted me to Sundeep Waslekar's book. Misgovernance is the fundamental problem of South Asia. Time and time again the people of this region have seen a new dawn break only to be disappointed long before breakfast. Independence itself, the overthrow of military dictators like Ayub Khan, Zia-ul-Haq, and General Ershad, the end of Indira Gandhi's Emergency, the curtailing of monarchical power in Nepal, how many more times will democracy lead to disillusionment before the people of South Asia realise good governance requires more than just a change of government?

Even the elite of South Asia don't seem to understand the paramount importance of good government. Indian intellectuals, as well as industrialists, were euphoric about economic liberalisation. Here at last was the key to progress. What is the net result? Liberalisation bogged down in indecision and investment already faltering. As one businessman put it to me recently: "moths flutter down like snowflakes but like snowflakes too they seem to melt away in the harsh sunlight of reality." A foreign investor complained: "In South-east Asia corruption is productive, here it is not."

Waslekar has analysed this misgovernance in detail. He has, I am delighted to say, not taken the easy way out and blamed it all on political corruption. When he discusses economic liberalisation, he hits on one of the fundamental weaknesses of governance in South Asia—blind imitation of other parts of the world, and a failure to realise that South Asian problems need South Asian solutions. Waslekar sees liberalisation coming as it does not on India, or any other South Asian country's own initiative, as showing the rulers "men-

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tal dependence on dominant international theories of the time." It may not be a popular question to ask but how much of the economic problem which India now faces is due to the fact that Nehru imported his socialism?

What is so strange about South Asia is that it really is the people who are responsible for the fact that there is a democratically elected government in every major country of the region, yet politicians forget them as soon as they come to power. After the end of the unpopular regime of General Zia, Benazir Bhutto sought the support of the army, not the people, to rule, as Waslekar points out. He also reminds us how Rajiv Gandhi sought power from the very brokers he'd promised the people he would eliminate.

Travel anywhere during an election and you will find that what the voters hate most is corruption. Yet the people don't force politicians to reform themselves. Waslekar compares Nehru's record on handling allegations of corruption with his successors and concludes, "the slide down in India's moral standards would appear deliberate". He also analyses the bureaucracy which the electorate hold just as responsible for corruption as the politicians. He quotes from a recent report on South Asian bureaucracies, which says: "The civil services who are expected to administer a vast nation with numerous problems have all along shown singular ineptitude in governing themselves."

Of particular relevance today is Waslekar's chapter on regional stability. He points out that governments use external threats to justify their own incompetence. How many Indian politicians admit that if the affairs of Kashmir had not been mishandled, Pakistan would not have had the opportunity to interfere.

Waslekar ends his book with a long jeremiad, a prophecy of the doom which will befall South Asia if governments don't reform. He calls for a moral revolution, and rightly warns against the dangers of consumerism which is, of course, the engine that drives economic growth according to the gurus of the policies now adopted by South Asia. But where Waslekar is weak is that he doesn't advocate alternative economic policies, he shies away from the task of giving a detailed and comprehensive programme of constitutional and administrative reforms, and he doesn't explain how to inspire a moral revolution in a world, not just a region, where greed is god.

I fear, therefore, that in response to

this important book the politicians and bureaucrats of South Asia will shrug their shoulders, and mutter to themselves "sab thik ho jayega", or "it will all come out right in the end". It will only be when the people say "bahut ho gaya", "enough is enough", that Waslekar will be anything more than a prophet crying in the wilderness. ■