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Indian Billionaires Get a Pass

By MANU JOSEPH

NEW DELHI — Prime Minister Manmohan Singh is a wise man, but in recent times no one in India has called him a "competent authority." Yet, that expression, mentioned in a preliminary report by the Central Bureau of Investigation that formally opened a police inquiry, inspired a consensus in the news media that Mr. Singh was indeed the unnamed "authority" in question.

The report was a part of the bureau's examination of the government's allocation of the country's coal deposits to private corporations between 2004 and 2009. Among those whose roles the bureau is interested in examining is one of India's richest men, Kumar Mangalam Birla.

In their coverage of the report, India's mainstream news media treated Mr. Singh and Mr. Birla very differently. Once again, Indian journalism appeared bold while attacking the prime minister and subdued when it had to investigate a billionaire.

There were insinuations that the prime minister was not revealing everything he knew about the allocation of coal deposits. Commentators and politicians taunted the prime minister and asked him to throw more light on the matter as he was not only the head of the government at the time of the allocation but also the country's coal minister.

Mr. Birla, on the other hand, was treated as an unfortunate victim of politics and overenthusiastic investigators, and even of India's historical mistrust of businessmen. On the front pages of newspapers and on television, leading businessmen expressed shock that Mr. Birla, whose company, Hindalco, was a beneficiary of a seemingly arbitrary allocation of coal deposits, had been dragged into the muck.

Industrialists asserted that accusations against top businessmen would further squeeze India's economy. Columnists wondered if the investigating bureau had enough evidence to point a finger at the head of a major business. Eventually, in a strong hint that the prime minister had accepted that he is the "competent authority" mentioned in the bureau's report, his office defended the awarding of the mining license to Hindalco in a statement that argued that no rules were broken.

Last week, the bureau raided Hindalco's offices and in its Delhi office found 250 million rupees, or $4 million, in cash. The bureau said the cash was unaccounted for. Hindalco expressed surprise at the discovery. The news media reported on this development but did not dwell on it for too long.

A fact that will not startle any professional journalist in India is that the nation's mainstream news media are firmly in the grip of corporations, which exercise control chiefly through direct or indirect ownership of news outlets and advertising budgets. It is rare for a major scam involving a corporation to be unearthed exclusively through a journalistic investigation. Most scandals, including the one over how the government allocated coal deposits, have surfaced as reports on investigations by government agencies or public interest lawsuits filed by concerned citizens.

The national fame of the anti-corruption gladiator Arvind Kejriwal, whose party will debut in electoral politics when it contests the Delhi state elections in December, is in no small measure due to the contribution of reporters suffocated by their own management. Mr. Kejriwal held news conferences accusing some of the richest Indians, including the billionaire Mukesh Ambani, of sponsoring corruption. This column has earlier argued that journalists used Mr. Kejriwal's news conferences to report news that their employers would not have normally allowed. It is in recognition of this journalistic ruse that Mr. Ambani sent legal notices charging defamation not to Mr. Kejriwal but to several television channels demanding that they refrain from reporting on Mr. Kejriwal's news conferences.

Except for the occasional reports on court rulings and briefings by government agencies, there is nothing much in India's mainstream media that has hurt the nation's big corporations. Indian journalism, it appears, has been tamed.

Manu Joseph is editor of the Indian newsweekly Open and author of the novel "The Illicit Happiness of Other People."