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GUILTY MEN

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The persistence of Mr. H.V. Kamath and a few other public-spirited men working against grave handicaps has triumphed in placing before the people the information that they should all along have had on the very serious misgivings which have been aroused by the conduct of public affairs in the State of Orissa under Mr. Biju Patnaik and Mr. Biren Mitra as successive Chief Ministers after the mid-term elections of 1961. The Government at the Centre and the Congress High Command have always appeared to act in the Orissa case only under pressure and with the utmost reluctance, though there is also fugitive evidence, as in the decision to ask the Central Bureau of Investigation to assist, of divided counsel, of the momentary assertion of the claims of public duty over party embarrassment. But what won in the end patently was the narrow vision of immediate party interest. Even now, with the publication of the CBI report, we have nothing like a full picture of what, on the face of it, looks like the worst episode of chicanery and sordidness in the public life of the country in all the years since independence. It is possible that in this Mr. Patnaik and Mr. Mitra are being wronged just as it is possible that the truth is far worse than we are allowed to guess at. But what matters is that the CBI was not permitted to make a full investigation and only drew its conclusions from such official files as were made available to it and the explanations offered by Mr Patnaik and Mr Mitra. The CBI conclusions--and we need not take them as finally established--are that there was gross evasion by the administrations under Mr Patnaik and Mr Mitra of all the normal rules of procedure in the purchasing practices of the Orissa Government to the direct benefit of companies in which the two Ministers or their families had substantial financial interests. The CBI report reveals not just a deal here and a deal there but a systematic pattern of operations in which public funds were recklessly diverted to serve private ends.

Yet the more important question now is not whether Mr Patnaik and Mr Mitra have received their just deserts. That question is of the bona fides in the matter of the Central Government and the Congress High Command. The Cabinet sub-committee which recorded its "profound concern at the picture emerging as a whole from the series of such individual transactions in many fields of activity of the State Government of improper use of authority by the leaders of the Government" also came to the conclusion "that in all fairness, their examination of the material available did not reveal that in the various transactions in which Mr Patnaik was concerned, he had personally derived any pecuniary benefits." Was this conclusion arrived at in good faith? Could any reasonable group of men acting with high attachment to standards of integrity in public life have reached a similar conclusion on the material which is now fortunately available to a wider panel of judgment than the Cabinet sub-committee constituted? The answer must be No, unqualifiedly No. We are not saying that the Cabinet sub-committee should have reached the contrary conclusion, but if there was ever a prima facie case established which needed to be more thoroughly gone into, this was such a case. A partisan attitude has resulted in a debasement of the values of public conduct to an extent where the Government's moral authority to continue in office has been placed under calamitous doubt.