Babu’s Day Out

A Karnataka civil servant shows how an upright bureaucracy can make a big difference

A tehsildar in Karnataka’s Shivamogga district went undercover as a labourer to work at a stone quarry and check for irregularities, then returned to raid the place. This exemplifies the critical role of the bureaucracy in India. Since January 2017, BN Girish has been on a crusade against illegal stone and sand mining in the taluk, following up tips from local people, conducting raids and seizing vehicles. Sand mining owing to the construction boom has become a lucrative industry in rural India but the state’s limited capacity for regulation has inflicted severe ecological damage to hills, rivers and forests.

Imagine, for a moment, if a corrupt or indifferent officer was in Girish’s place. Now size up the damage such rapacious mining in just one taluk wreaks on the environment, the losses to public exchequer, and the weakening of law and order machinery when illegal activity gains impunity and profit. Then multiply this by the thousands of taluks in India and we get a sense of the importance of the lower bureaucracy. Politics was meant to take power to the people and cut through red tape. But in India a neta-babu nexus has for long taken advantage of hierarchical inequalities to subvert the system.

This has run its course and must now change. The RTI Act, the spread of education, ubiquitous smartphones, rising aspirations, and worries over environmental degradation are empowering communities to speak up against illegality. It also helps when honest officers come to the aid of hapless citizens. Not surprisingly, the struggles of bureaucrats like Ashok Khemka against successive Haryana governments struck a chord with the public. A new breed of civil servants with a can-do attitude has emerged in recent years with popular following that even rivals politicians. But the likes of BN Girish who go the extra mile must become the norm, not the exception.