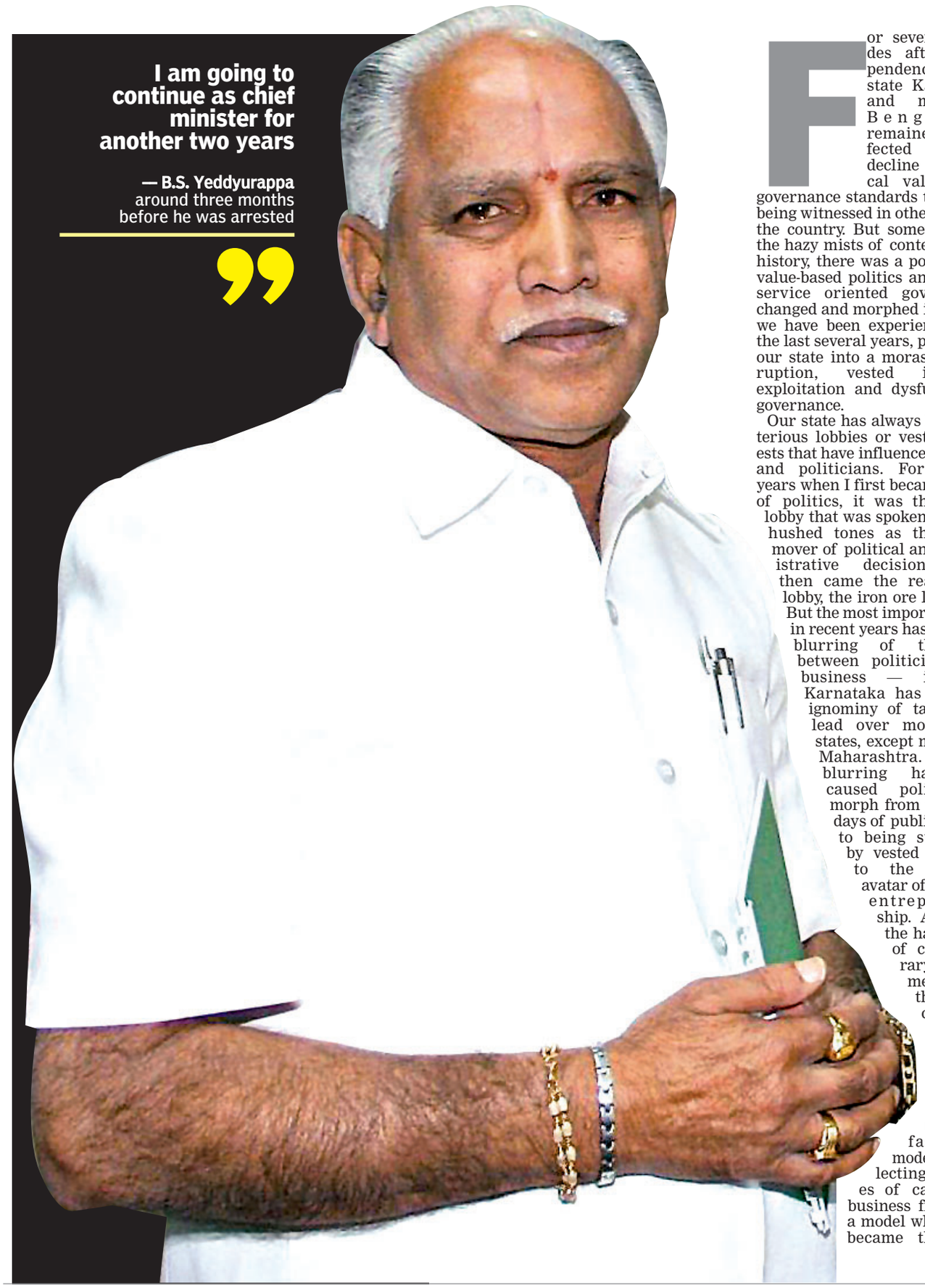
THE STATE OF KARNATAKA WAS LARGELY UNTOUCHED BY CORRUPTION, AT LEAST ON A LARGE SCALE, TILL RECENTLY. NOW, SHADY DEALS HAVE BECOME COMMONPLACE. POLITICIANS SPEND CRORES EVEN FOR A SMALL, LOCAL ELECTION. WHAT IS NOW NEEDED IS TRANSPARENCY IN ALL GOVERNMENT DEALS AND BETTER GOVERNANCE

RAJEEV CHANDRASEKHAR
Member of Parliament

BIG STAKES IN KARNATAKA



I am going to continue as chief minister for another two years

— B.S. Yeddyurappa
around three months before he was arrested

For several decades after Independence, my state Karnataka and my city Bengaluru remained unaffected by the decline in political values and governance standards that were being witnessed in other parts of the country. But somewhere in the hazy mists of contemporary history, there was a point when value-based politics and public-service oriented government changed and morphed into what we have been experiencing for the last several years, propelling our state into a morass of corruption, vested interests, exploitation and dysfunctional governance.

Our state has always had mysterious lobbies or vested interests that have influenced politics and politicians. For several years when I first became aware of politics, it was the liquor lobby that was spoken about in hushed tones as the prime mover of political and administrative decision-making; then came the real estate lobby, the iron ore lobby, etc. But the most important shift in recent years has been the blurring of the line between politicians and business — in this, Karnataka has had the ignominy of taking the lead over most other states, except maybe for Maharashtra. This blurring has now caused politics to morph from the early days of public service to being supported by vested interests to the current avatar of political entrepreneurship. Again, in the hazy mists of contemporary history, members of the political class woke up to realise that they could replace the old fashioned model of collecting suitcases of cash from business friends to a model where they became the businessmen/investor themselves.

Political entrepreneurship, as we have seen in this state and city over the last decade, has completely altered the dynamics of politics — from a message of promises of governance and progress, to being almost money driven. How else do you explain the expenses incurred during a corporator's election touching ₹2.5 crore? Why would anyone spend money unless it was a form of investment to make more money — it clearly can't be to serve the public that a candidate spends this kind of money.

I am a big proponent of entrepreneurship. But political entrepreneurship has, as its philosophical underpinning, the twin virtues of exploitation and theft. Political entrepreneurs create wealth, and therefore, political power for themselves — by exploiting or stealing from government contracts or public assets like land or natural resources.

Take a look around our city today — the controversies over land notification and denotifications, the number of corporators that are involved in government contracts — look further north and see the number of iron ore miners who are politicians or vice versa, and you will understand the phenomenon of political entrepreneurship and how corruption and political power have become inextricably mixed up. Don't be fooled into believing that this applies to one political party alone. It cuts across political parties and has become the *de jure* model for politicians.

The conventional wisdom is that this applies to the political class alone — but that would be only seeing half the picture. This saga of loot and exploitation of this city and state also involves, as recent media reports have pointed out, some of the luminaries of the judiciary too. The virus of corruption and the easy money from this form of exploitation has been embraced by representatives of all the institutions that comprise public life.

So, what do we do? Is there no light at the end of this bleak tunnel of exploitation and corruption? I am amongst those who believe that there is light and change is showing signs of emerging from the wastelands. Some upright officers and politicians are beginning to speak out and exposing the corrupt actions and double-speak of some of our leaders — political and otherwise. The media is playing a very, very important role — waking up after many years of being placid bystanders to the rape and exploitation of our proud city and state. The genie has been unleashed. The fact that some judges are fearlessly pursuing the truth, and big and small fish also, should encourage us and more importantly send a chilling message to those that wish to exploit our city — be prepared for the consequences

Gali Janardhan Reddy

Gali Karunakar Reddy

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Our city needs protection from this small group that has been exploiting it for its personal gain. I have always believed that corruption and power politics can only be dealt with by scaring the perpetrators into realising that there is a cost to this form of exploitation.

Not just electoral costs, but more importantly, costs in terms of prosecution. For too long, we have hoped that the consequences of actions of a political leader will be meted out during the next hustings. That's neither enough nor foolproof. Hence the message of having erring bureaucrats and politicians and their crony businessmen being sent to jail is the most powerful deterrent.

The recent Balasubramaniam report has shown the hundreds of acres of government land that has been illegally passed off to private interests. There is a need to act on this report and investigate the beneficiaries of this and punish some of them, if we are to ensure this exploitation stops.

But, most importantly, to put an end to this form of naked exploitation and this phenomenon of political entrepreneurship, we need a five-pronged approach:

1. A complete culture of disclosures and transparency that makes it impossible for the government to undertake any contracts without significant public disclosure.
2. A law that makes it illegal and criminal for those in public life or government to benefit from the government through contracts or any public assets.
3. The definition of conflict of interest needs to be tightened to prevent the benami model that's increasingly used to bypass it.
4. Far less administrative discretion on the issue of land notification and denotification — such denotifications not being permitted for any private purpose.
5. Use of auctions and tenders as the only way government assigns public assets or resources to private business.

There are many good and decent men and women in public life — both in politics and administration. We need to work to move the pendulum of electoral and other support towards them and away from the money power that has laid waste our state and city over the last decade.