

Crony commissions

Leadership and staffing of national commissions should not be a matter of political largesse

THE chairperson of the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) made a break with tradition by refusing to leave her job merely because the minister of women and child development may have expected it of her. She spoke out against one of the implicit assumptions that governs the staffing of national commissions — the fact that each political dispensation treats it as an opportunity for patronage, handing over the job to those it favours. While many other heads of commissions have resigned, the NCPCR chairperson has cited the founding act of the commission, and said that the ministry was obliged to furnish a reason for asking her to quit.

If nothing else, this should invite attention to the way successive governments have turned the constitution of national commissions into exercises of personal largesse, with a fresh wave of appointments and a disbanding of existing administrators when the government changes, weakening the fibre of the institution and its capacity to function autonomously. There are dozens of such commissions, with their own offices, staff, perks and privileges, and

this structure is replicated at the state level too. Within the rules that specify eligibility, there is enormous room for discretion, and ministers often choose old favourites or those who have served time in the ruling party. In February, the Supreme Court had rapped the Centre in the context of the NCPCR, saying that there were no clear criteria to select members, nor were advertisements issued to invite applications. Relying solely on the recommendations of ministers, MPs and other political functionaries would not guarantee the the best candidate, and given that the appointee was being paid out of public funds, the job should be left open to competition, the court said.

This kind of spoils system means that those who head these commissions are still defined by their loyalty to political sides, rather than oriented towards the public responsibility they are mandated to carry out. The NCPCR chairperson's refusal to play by the rules of the Delhi establishment could be a small start towards insulating and strengthening national commissions, making sure their leadership is a matter of competence and public service, rather than partisanship and proximity to power.

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