

From the Editor

I remember a composite satellite photograph of the world taken at night-time. One country stood out like a black blotch on a map that was mostly shining – North Korea, the 'Hermit Kingdom'.

This fortnight I felt very much like I live in my own hermit kingdom. Perhaps an ascetic life in a tiny ashram, reading V.S. Naipaul's 'An Area of Darkness' by candlelight, made sense. I was in turmoil: I could not tell if I ought to be serene and stoical about one-tenth of the world's population (resident in my country) being hit by a huge power outage. I did not know if I ought to be proud that India's per capita national electricity consumption is one of the very lowest in the world at 778 units annually; that 15 States and Union Territories consume even less than this average; that the eastern states are in near-perennial darkness. And yes – that even North Korea's per capita electricity consumption is higher than India's. And on July 31, the second successive day the blackouts hit, Power Minister Sushil Kumar Shinde was handed a promotion to Home Minister and Leader of the House in the Lok Sabha. If more proof were needed that we live in a topsy-turvy world, North Korea was No. 15 on the London Olympics medals table with four golds and one bronze, while India was No. 46 with one silver and three bronze medals, with only three days of the Games left. While I was picking myself up off the floor after this series of knock-out punches, fresh data showed June industrial production had shrunk by 1.8 per cent. It felt like India was being pushed back to the Bronze Age.

Indeed, Cicero would exclaim *o tempora o mores* if he read our painstaking investigation of deceit and corruption in the 'placement' race that hundreds of thousands of freshly-minted college graduates find themselves in. India is in danger of being the world's largest repository of under-skilled, unemployable young people. When engineering colleges fixated more on profits than professionalism jostle one another to attract fee-paying students, they often boast of their '100 per cent placement' records. But jobs are not very easy to find once these degree factories spit out their latest batch.

Enter the middlemen, who promise the colleges they will find jobs for all their graduates, and promise the graduates they will all be employed. It is fertile ground for the unscrupulous: India's IT industry employs 2.8 million people. This is the time of year when college graduates join the workforce, and our investigation is particularly timely. In late July, NASSCOM's HR summit in Chennai ended on an upbeat note. "The business challenge of the modern-day HR mandates it to implement Exemplary Talent Practices to source, attract, develop and retain this talent," the IT-BPO industry group said. Associate Editor Goutam Das spent four months reporting on the story. He visited the engineering college clusters of Vijayawada and Khammam, speaking to several colleges there. He spoke to placement officers at 20 rural colleges across Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Orissa and Uttarakhand. He also met, wrote to, and spoke on the phone with at least 40 executives of information technology companies, and a handful working with placement agencies and recruitment firms. Both he and Associate Editor E. Kumar Sharma also tried every method to get hold of one of the main characters in this sordid play, who you will read about in the story they unearthed starting on page 60 – but, like the Scarlet Pimpernel, "they sought him here, they sought him there" and Kumar can now count several policemen, lawyers and court officials among his friends, as he became a fixture at police stations and law courts in recent weeks. We hope these tales will help many an unsuspecting and desperate parent (and eager jobseeker).

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