

### ***Lobbying doesn't make Walmart a bent player***

Now that the Opposition parties have lost the retail-FDI battle so convincingly with both houses of Parliament voting in its favour, the anti-FDI lot have found a new weapon. They've managed to capture the nation's attention by insinuating that the R120 crore spent by the Bentonville-headquartered Walmart for lobbying for opening up the Indian market is proof of the bribes it paid. That, much like the infamous \$20 million Enron education fund, Walmart too used this to bribe journalists, lawmakers and bureaucrats, among others. Hence the demand by the BJP, the Left, the Trinamool and others for a 'fair probe' to find out the 'names of recipients' and that the retail giant not be allowed to set up shop in India till this was done.

Nothing could be more ridiculous than this. Apart from the fact that the size of the so-called bribe seems very small compared to the kind of numbers that do the rounds of the rumour circuit when any policy change occurs or gets blocked for that matter, MPs need to understand that lobbying is a part of modern business. At the extreme, lobbying is used to campaign against corporations dirtying lakes—think of the monies spent by green activists. In this case, it may well turn out to be that these were just the fees paid to a PR firm of the sort that both the Congress and the BJP routinely hire to work on their campaigns. Such fees could also include the cost of taking journalists and/or lawmakers to examine the operations of Walmart and other big retailers overseas, hardly a big crime, subject to the usual disclosures, if it helps open them to new ideas—indeed, it would probably be true that PR firms would be engaged on the other side, to show the dangers of allowing organised retail of the Walmart type to take root here. Indeed, if there's a lesson from this, it is that India too needs to legalise lobbying, which happens in any case, but which will come to the surface if legalised—that way, MPs can, as a matter of course, get details of which journalists and which lawmakers went on a sponsored trip and which didn't. That, in itself, is not a crime either, but more transparency is something to be aspired for.