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ALL IS NOT WELL - India is yet to undergo a spectacular transformation

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Honest reflection

The world, even more than India, celebrated yesterday in contemplation not of the wonder that was India but the splendour that will be India. It's an enjoyable fantasy, but not easy to sustain when you have to queue in post offices to get letters abroad cancelled because otherwise the stamps might be peeled off.

Never mind, Goldman Sach's BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India and China) report places India third, ahead of Japan, in the global pecking order of economies by 2050. An American academic, Jagdish (Jag) N. Sheth, held a Singapore audience spellbound recently with tales of how Indian pilots worst their American counterparts in F-16 dogfights, while Indian ships outmanoeuvre American vessels in naval exercises. And a Singaporean diplomat, Kishore Mahbubani, regaled Pennsylvania University's Center for Advanced Study of India with a scintillating talk titled, "Will India emerge as an Eastern or Western Power?"

Such predictions and projections are highly gratifying for Indians with access to the fashionable global buzz. That means Delhi and Bombay sophisticates, expatriate professionals, and the diaspora, but not its Malaysian worker or Fiji labourer members. The question for millions of others is not whether India will emerge in Gandhian loincloth or borrowed top hat and tails (Mahbubani's metaphors for East and West), but whether it will emerge at all in his sense.

What is even more pertinent is whether Indians want to do so. The '*chalta hai*' philosophy implies a profound disdain for the upgrading to which Singaporeans are fervently committed. At its best, it implies that neither prince nor pauper will starve in India so long as there is a crust of bread to share, as Kipling says in "The Miracle of Puran Bhagat". At worst, it rules out upgraded India with a place in the sun.

As recounted before in these columns, P.V. Narasimha Rao gave a revealing reply when I asked how long it would take for the ripple effect of foreign investment to change India. That wasn't the purpose of liberalization, he explained. "There would be blood on the streets" if he waited for foreign investment to solve the problems of poverty. He sought capital from abroad to free domestic resources for social welfare and infrastructure during the eighth five-year plan (1992-97).

That did not happen. Foreign investment disappointed expectations and welfare and infrastructure remained woefully neglected. "A nation of bursting opportunities is also a land of perpetual struggles," quoting Sonia Gandhi. "A country of dazzling prosperity is also a country of dehumanising poverty." If there are 300 million consumers, at least 300 million others languish below the poverty level. Global power must rest on more uniform growth.

True, dismal industrial slums disfigured Britain in the high noon of Empire. But command of the seas and dominion over palm and pine ensured vast captive markets and cheap raw materials. Without those advantages, India must seek

equilibrium between the “classes and masses”, as Mani Shankar Aiyar puts it.

Population pressure — predictably, numbers are increasing fastest in the lower reaches — is one drawback. Foreign visitors often suggest that New Delhi, as the national capital, should present a more sparkling image. A beginning has been made with a spanking underground railway that makes Calcutta’s trundling trains look like a steam-age relic, but there is no way of insulating the capital from the shabby, congested and insanitary reality of the surrounding multitudes without erecting an artificial barrier that would provoke national uproar.

That leads to the second drawback: our consensual politics prevent swift and drastic solutions. Objections were powerful enough to delay the Narmada Dam by nearly 20 years. The current battle in West Bengal over land for Tata’s cheap car or a special economic zone to be run by Indonesia’s Salim group also illustrates the coercive force of dissenting opinion. Self-seeking middlemen and out-of-work politicians compound the reluctance of conservative peasants to part with ancestral fields. A dictatorship might have cut through objections. Not a government that proudly presides over the world’s largest democracy and a prime minister known for his gentle touch.

A third reason for drabness could be that the rich are retreating more and more into privately-serviced “gated colonies”, where water, electricity, conservancy and other such services are corporate responsibilities. That leaves only the poor to use public services. No wonder courier companies do roaring business, and you can’t any longer get an airmail label for love or money.

The most important explanation has little to do with practical limitations. Inadequate funds did not explain the tawdry cutlery that Lee Kuan Yew encountered in Rashtrapati Bhavan, by far the grandest residence imperial Britain ever built overseas. Nor did incompetence, since India has been making rockets, missiles, fighter aircraft, satellites and, ultimately, the Bomb. The *chalta hai* attitude did. Table-setting isn’t important to those who traditionally use their fingers.

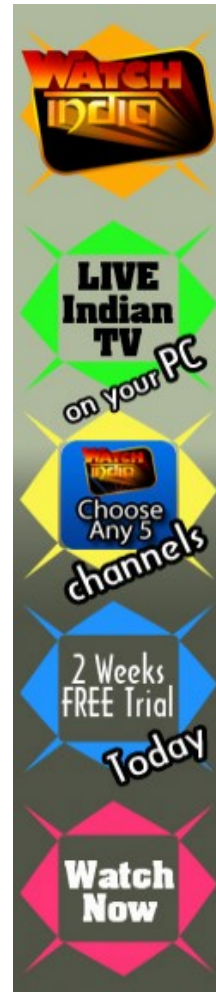
Individual desire for Porsche cars or luxury cruise holidays is not powerful or widespread enough to translate into a national demand for improved services and facilities. Nor does private hankering for goodies add up to a communitarian spirit. Watch a flat-owner meticulously sweep out his rooms and leave the sweepings on the landing to grasp what that means.

Abroad, Indians are making even greater waves than Narasimha Rao anticipated when he predicted that his reforms would enable Indian businessmen “ [to] also form multinationals and go to other countries.” It was calculated during the Asian meltdown that the Birlas had made a \$2,500 million profit on their \$1,000 million investment in Thailand. Ratan Tata’s \$486 million acquisition of Singapore’s NatSteel takes his group to China, Thailand, Vietnam, the Philippines and Australia. Arcelor Mittal is the world’s premier steel company, with 330,000 employees in more than 60 countries. Azim Premji and N.R. Narayan Murthy are flourishing in China.

Back home, the electricity fails, drains choke and letters disappear in the post. Is there another country with pretensions to global status where state schools and public hospitals are, by and large, so appalling? Granted, conditions in Calcutta are the worst, but streets everywhere are flooded each monsoon. India’s buses must be the world’s most ramshackle.

A social historian might trace this indifference to quality to the concept of *maya*, reinforced by Mahatma Gandhi’s emphasis on simplicity. The paradox of Sarojini Naidu’s famous quip is lost among the many other paradoxes of a country whose booming growth, centres of educational excellence and ostentatious wedding parties go hand-in-hand with exaltations of self-denial. Jawaharlal Nehru once saw merit in boasting that he spent only Rs 50 a month. So compelling is the conditioning that even successful members of the diaspora vehemently deny going abroad to make money. That would seem disgustingly mercenary. Nor do they lose an opportunity to profess loyalty to supposedly Indian values rejecting luxury.

Marx would have recognized myth as another capitalist conspiracy to keep down the proletariat. It is one reason why an Indian at home remains reconciled to his lot while, abroad, he buys from a Scotsman, sells to a Jew and still makes a profit — Nani Palkhivala’s famous but wildly politically incorrect simile. The rich have never had it so good, but spiralling prices mean the poor have never had it so bad. And numbers give them the power to drag down the general level.



Answering his question, Mahbubani decided that India would neither go East like China nor West like Japan, but devise a unique middle way. Since India has never been anything but itself, there is no reason why the future should be different. But will India emerge?

Not unless there is a return to Narasimha Rao's original rationale for reforms — far more thought, planning and money for mass welfare — before the next Republic Day comes round. There may not be blood on the streets otherwise, but neither will there be the spectacular transformation that the world assumes has already taken place.

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