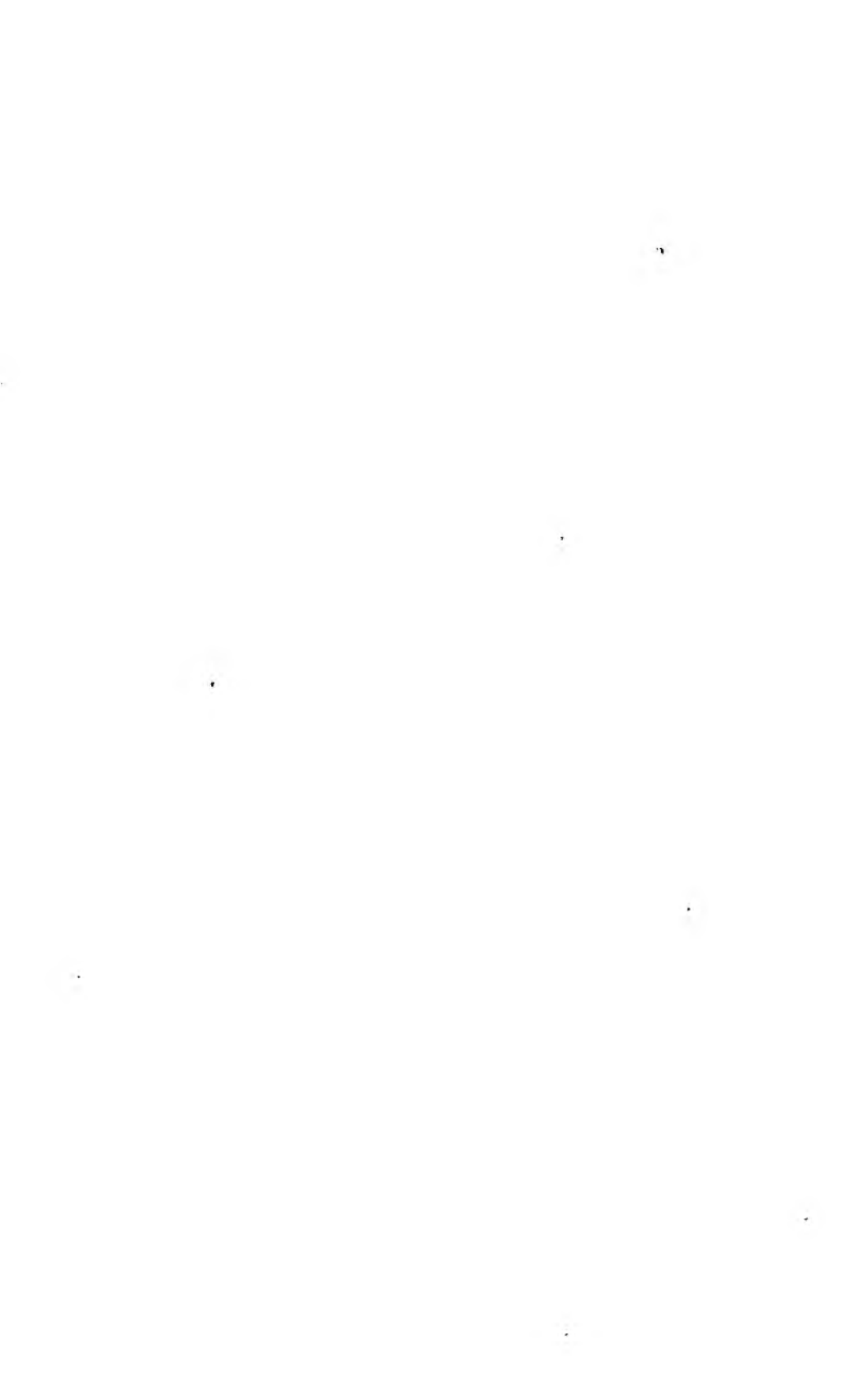


SHOBHAA DÉ

SUPERSTAR  
INDIA

FROM INCREDIBLE TO UNSTOPPABLE





PENGUIN BOOKS  
SUPERSTAR INDIA

Obsessive—compulsive writer of fifteen books, Shobhaa Dé has spent the last three years in the pursuit of her first vocation, journalism. Her columns are ubiquitous, appearing in nearly every newspaper and magazine of note. They carry her customarily edgy observations on matters of politics, the economy, business and commerce, the heart and the hearth.

Best-selling author, jet-setting commentator and honest critic, she is most at home in Mumbai—a city which is also a recurrent ‘character’ in much of her work—living there with her husband Dilip and (when they’re around) their six children.



# Superstar India

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*For both my mothers,*

*Aie*

*and*

*India.*

*And . . . for the one-billion-plus Superindians  
who have made India a global superstar!*





## Acknowledgements

It started with a phone call. David Davidar was at the Penguin India office in New Delhi and had called for a casual chat. He asked whether I was planning a new book, and I glibly replied, 'I am always planning a new book.' David went into his 'Hmmmmmm' mode before asking, 'What's it about?' I had to think fast. Really, really fast. I tossed two ideas at him, one for a novel, the other for this book. An India book. I must have sounded pretty impassioned as I took off on how I feel about the country . . . and my own life, seen through that filter, given the fact India and I are the same age. 'You've got your book,' David declared crisply, before handing over the phone to Thomas Abraham. 'Congratulations!' said Thomas. And we were in business.

I turn into a monster when a book is on. Several people are compelled to tolerate me while I growl and snap my way through the writing of it. My special thanks to darling Prita Maitra—a kinder, gentler editor would be hard to find. I feel blessed.

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Shobhna Dé

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And above all, *dhanyavad*, India . . . my joy, my inspiration. Without you, this book would not have been possible to write!

# Prologue

## ... because I believe

Bhumibol Adulyadej, Thailand's beloved king, turned eighty in December 2007. Millions of his loyal subjects wore yellow on that day. Why? Yellow happens to be the ruler's favourite colour, and his people wanted to express their love and respect for the world's longest reigning monarch by being colour co-ordinated with him on his special day. It was an entirely spontaneous, untutored gesture. No manipulation involved. Nobody was paid to conform to the yellow dress code. What a sweet and simple way of demonstrating solidarity and commitment, I thought to myself as I scanned the papers the next morning. Would such a thing happen in today's India? Is there even a single individual with the capacity to touch our hearts, inspire us, lead us? Alas, the answer is a flat and disheartening 'no'.

What then has given India its special glow, its special status? I asked myself that question at least a hundred times while writing this book. I believe I finally have my answer. To be a superpower, you need super people. India's biggest strength lies there—we are a super people!

The answer surprised me. It was that obvious! And yet, it may just be India's best-kept secret. The world is suddenly looking at us with wonderment, even a tinge of envy. India counts. India rocks! India is 'hot'.

x Why now? What has changed? I believe it is because we have taken the world by surprise. Why, we have taken even ourselves by surprise! We see our freshly-minted image and wonder, 'Is that really us?' There is charming disbelief in that reaction. But there is also renewed confidence. We have finally started believing in us! Reason enough to rejoice. And with this self-belief, we have started renegotiating our past equation with the world. We are in the happy position to do so, that, too, on our own terms. And because of this new-found assertiveness, we are finally ready to invest in ourselves. We know India is offering the best returns. Why look outside, as we once did, when the dazzling story of success and prosperity is unfolding right here, right now?

I have a small confession to make. When I began the book, I had a Bollywood song buzzing inside my head. 'Where's the party tonight?', the compellingly catchy track from a widely discussed movie, perfectly captured my upbeat feelings towards India, and, therefore, the book. In fact, I was sorely tempted to make it the theme song for the project, and almost did. But as I continued writing, the heady euphoria of the first few weeks got replaced by a more sober emotion. For us to leverage and sustain the 'India Moment' that is dominating our psyche at present, we also need a few reality checks to keep us on course.

Even as I took a long, hard look at some of the obvious downsides (Q: 'What are the three things keeping India down?' A: 'Corruption. Corruption. Corruption.'), I still felt the upsides (Q: 'What's so fantastic about the India Story?' A: 'People. People. People' ) tilted the scales in our favour. God! If only we knew how to better utilize our greatest national asset—the billion-plus people who make us what we are. Either we see them in this positive light and maximize the benefits of those daunting numbers. Or we foolishly look at our population as a liability and throw away a natural advantage.

Statistics can be as terrifying or reassuring as we'd like them to be. They are mere numbers after all. It is a fact that 77 per cent of India live on less than twenty rupees a day. Let's not sweep these grim digits under the carpet. But let us also pay attention to another, equally relevant statistic : 50 per cent of India is under thirty-five years of age. That makes us a remarkably young country, with a youth force of half-a-billion! It is entirely up to us how we harness those energies, motivate this gigantic mass and get going. Never before has '*Mera Bharat Mahaan*' been seen as '*Mera Bharat Jawan*'. It is indeed a fantastically dynamic growth period in India's sixty-year-old life, and we should make the most of our resource—the twenty- and thirty-somethings who are driving the economic spurt. The future is here—and it is appealingly youthful. These are the new kids on the block. India's hopes, dreams and aspirations rest with them. Will they deliver?

x i

On a far more personal level, this is my special love

letter to my country. I want the world to fall in love with India.

To go back to a Bollywood song again, '*Yeh mera prem patra padkar, ki tum naraaz na hona...*' This is a story about India. My India. It is a very personal story. You see, I am exactly as old as India. So, in a wonderful way, I am very much a part of the India story. I have watched the country change—have been a vital part of that change myself. As they say in business circles, I am fully invested in India. Always have been. I have never considered living anywhere else, never sought opportunities overseas, never fled, despite the odds. I kept the faith. And—YES!—my faith has paid off.

xii

I was an early believer. India has that effect on people. For, India is very easy to fall in love with! Impossible and demanding. Exasperating and annoying. But equally enchanting and alluring, captivating and quixotic. It is difficult for me to be dispassionate about India. I embraced it a long time ago, the way I embraced my own mother. What makes India such a Superstar in my eyes? Don't most children think that about their mothers? Today, Aie, my biological mother, is no more. But I can still claim, '*Mere paas Maa hai.*' I have India. I feel blessed.

Shobhaa Dé  
March 2008

*Right*  
between the  
*Eyes ...*





X'mas. Agra. Cold. Cold and foggy. My husband and I had driven to the city that exists for one reason alone—the Taj Mahal. Like Cairo and the Pyramids. Agra and the Taj... they go hand-in-hand. Just like the freshly-scrubbed, neatly-dressed schoolchildren we saw, making their way to school, skipping along happily on an unpaved, dusty road right outside the city limits of this historic town. Our guide, Mr Dubey, started on his spiel as my eyes followed the kids. They'd gotten off the road now, and were running across a mustard field. It was a scene straight out of a Yash Chopra film.

Every imaginable prop was in place—a village woman in a *ghungat* was drawing water from a well, a shepherd was tending to his flock of well-fed sheep, using a neem twig to get the strays back in line, sand merchants were unloading sacks at the local *mandi*, as mica flakes caught the light and twinkled happily. Donkey carts laden with foodgrain took the same narrow road as hired vehicles of tourists 'doing' Agra in a day. Tourists, like ourselves. Yes,

Tourists in our  
own country.  
The 'other'  
India. The one  
'we' know so  
little about

us. Tourists in our own country. The 'other' India. The one 'we' know so little about. And like any outsiders, my husband and I commented on the backwardness of the countryside and wondered what sort of an India those schoolkids would experience. Would they be excluded from the euphoria? Would they even get to finish their schooling and dream a bigger dream than their parents dared to?

4 Worse ... were they already reconciled to their current reality? Did they even know that while empowered, urban India was rejoicing wildly and talking recklessly about being a super-super-power, here, in the only city of the world boasting—not one, but—three significant Heritage Sites (the magnificent Agra Fort, the even more magnificent Fatehpur Sikri and that wonder-of-wonders, the luminous mausoleum known simply as the Taj), the picture was pretty dismal.

Shabby *jhuggies* and *jhopdis* line the unimpressive route to the most-recognized '**Monument to Love**'. I thought of all the VVIPs who'd taken the same uneven highway over the years, from the Kennedys and Bill and Chelsea Clinton to Princess Diana and the Musharrafs. They'd seen our squalor, too! Suddenly, I felt defensive and proprietorial—so what if we didn't have super highways and fast tracks? So what if the only impressive milestones along that road to Fatehpur Sikri were built by Emperor Akbar in the sixteenth century? Those schoolkids looked so happy running through that field of yellow ... one of them had a colourful kite in his hand that the others were

trying to grab. Maybe he'd fly it later ... maybe the kite would soar ... maybe the fog would clear ... maybe 'we' would stop obsessing over India's destiny, trying foolishly to control it the only way we know—through great, big technological leaps and cosmetic changes that 'conform' to an accepted model of progress and prosperity, as defined by the G8 countries: great roads, great infrastructure, great communication systems ... all of India, neatly wired, all set to roll ... glittering malls, delirious shoppers, packaged foods a-plenty, a dizzying choice of cars, clothes, bathroom tiles. The 'wow' factor ... I was beginning to get slightly breathless with excitement.

Everything and anything seemed possible ... achievable. Suddenly, I became that little boy with the kite. Agra looked glorious, the humble *dhaba* food was the best meal I'd ever eaten ('what *jeera tadka* in the *aloo sabzi*! Amazing *daal* ... another *lachcha paratha* please ... and oh ... make that two *lassis*'). This was actually happening. At the Indraprastha dhaba, which Mr Dubey reluctantly took us to ('But why a dhaba, madam? There are good five-star hotels in Agra. Only bus-class tourists stop at dhabas ...'), I saw a group of south Indian ladies examining their thali of vegetarian food with deep suspicion ... the men folk picked up each item and smelt it before giving the all-clear.

Meanwhile, another group of teenage girls from Ludhiana was venturing into the fields behind the dhaba, their healthy bodies squeezed into extra-tight jeans. They were looking over their shoulders and giggling as they sought a thick-enough bush to pee behind. Oh—oh—

there went another black mark against India. No loos. No toilets—just the fields welcoming natural fertilizers. Mr Dubey and the driver looked like they had clearly enjoyed the lunch, as we got back into the car, and he launched into a poetic discourse on the legacy of the Mughal kings.

I switched off and watched the uninspiring landscape, wondering a little angrily why nobody in all these years had bothered to work on making Agra the number one tourist destination, if not in the world, then in Asia. It was, by far, the most recognized symbol of India. Even a mid-Western potato farmer would instantly associate the monument with India. But we had failed to leverage that knowledge.

6 We had failed to value our most precious property. There was an air of listlessness in the area, with the exception of a very enthusiastic Mr Dubey, who seemed to love his job. People seemed strangely resigned to their lot. For miles on end, one could pass vast tracts of nothingness, interspersed with modest land holdings and tiny vegetable patches growing white radish and cauliflower. **Our people looked poor ... were poor ... had always been poor ... would they remain poor?**

Mr Dubey proudly pointed out stone carvers creating complex grilles, doorways and pillars from the famous pink sandstone of the area. 'It was Emperor Shah Jahan who made pure white marble fashionable,' Mr Dubey chuckled. 'Till then, pink was the favoured colour ... and when marble was used, it was black.' We watched young men clad in threadbare clothes crouched over slabs of

stone, their powerful arms and skilled hands gouging out designs going back centuries, for a pittance. Children who'd never been inside a schoolroom were taking a small break between lifting stones and sweeping the discarded dust from finished grilles. Their earnings were pitiful. Their eyes blank, their bellies bloated. 'But at least they aren't starving,' Mr Dubey said thoughtfully. Yes ... at least they weren't starving.

\*

That night, the hotel we were staying at had announced a 'Grand X'mas Buffet'. It seemed somehow surreal to be in Agra, of all places, watching someone in a Santa suit, walking around the marble lobby of the five-star hotel, shaking hands with excited kids. In one corner, a large plastic X'mas tree, decorated with empty 'gift boxes' and discoloured cotton wool ('snow', don't you know?), glittered with strings of fairy lights. We sat at the bar and tried to get into the swing of things.

7

A crooner dressed in festive red was belting out '*I will survive*,' while other band members tried hard to simulate Ho-Ho-Ho cheer. I thought they were from the Philippines. 'Oh no, madam ... they are from Mizoram ... they are Indian ... but they don't look it,' the manager brightly clarified. 'They don't look it ...' Ooof! His words burned! What do 'Indians' look like, I asked myself. Did I look 'Indian' enough? Clearly, not ... at least not in the eyes of all these officious guards and cops guarding Agra's precious

monuments. I was constantly stopped and asked to prove my bonafides—and how does one do that? And why?

Because an entrance ticket for ‘Indians’ is twenty bucks. And for foreigners, it’s over 100. Armed as I was with a twenty-buck ticket, the minders who didn’t accept my ‘Indianness’ insinuated that I was an imposter trying to short-change the government by eighty rupees. ‘Wrong tikkutt, wrong tikkutt ... go back to counter ... pay more,’ they’d barked. If I was subjected to this rubbish, with my unmistakably *desi* looks—I cannot imagine the *haalat* of all these Indians from the north-east. No wonder most ‘Chinese’ restaurants in our metros ‘import’ lovely young ladies from Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Sikkim, and pass them off as the real thing from Beijing.

8

Well, the little band in the lobby was not receiving too much encouragement from patrons on this special night, and my heart went out to the three, trying valiantly to keep the X’mas spirit alive by breaking into a medley of carols. At this point, a sweet English granny decided to take to the improvised patch of a dance floor with her visibly embarrassed granddaughter. Seeing their brave example, a few more foreigners decided to be sporting and shake a leg. I considered the option myself, but finally chickened out. We opted for the ‘grand buffet’. Strips (not slices) of turkey were gingerly presented in a dubious-tasting sauce. Limp veggies followed, and perhaps reading our disappointed expressions, the chef decided we should combine that with some no-nonsense *daal-chawal* and *palak-paneer-naan*. **Okaaaay.** I was fine with that ... but

when the waiter insisted on our eating X'mas pud with the rice, we decided to protest.

Mildly, of course. Didn't want the foreigners at the next table to witness our little drama. It's one thing seeing it for ourselves, why allow foreigners a window into how 'unsophisticated' and 'totally clueless' we are when it comes to turkey, ham and X'mas pud? Right? But would it be the same in reverse? Imagine a French restaurant trying to 'do a Diwali', in Paris, just to add some exotic flavour to Gallic cuisine. **Imagine a snooty foodie being served a malai-kulfi with caviar, or something equally absurd?** Would clued-in Europeans at adjoining tables feel as apologetic, assuming their neighbours were Indians? Hell, no!

9

This was one X'mas I would never forget for more than just the missing cranberry sauce. It was an X'mas that perfectly encapsulated the mood of the country ... my own mood ... and perhaps, the mood of the watching world, too ... it was all there on our table-for-two, decorated with a tiny X'mas tree made in China, as we sipped French wine and single malt bottled in Scotland, ate strips (not slices) of turkey bred in America, with Russians and Japanese at adjoining tables, listening to a trio from Mizoram, singing Latino numbers, with the crooner wearing a Spanish bolero, as Kashmiri shawl-sellers came out of their stores to join in the merriment, and a turbaned *jyotish* from Varanasi read the palm of a visibly distressed Englishwoman in a corner of the lobby.

While going back to our suite that night ('It is our

best ... Amitabh Bachchan has stayed in it ... so has Abhishek'), I thought of Raj Kapoor. Why Raj Kapoor? Well ... more accurately, I thought of a song he'd made famous way back in the '50s ... '*Mera joota hai Janani ... yeh patloon Englishtani, sar pe lal topi Russi, phir bhi dil hai Hindustani* ...' And I thought of a catchy Channel V tagline that declared jauntily, 'We're like that only.' Perhaps it's true, our *bhel-puri* identity does make us unique. Twenty years ago, this very endearing attribute would've made us cringe—today, we're confident enough to convert it into our USP. Well ... so, we like to believe.

10 There is still an edge of defensiveness when 'outsiders' attack this attribute and mock our *desi* traits. As was demonstrated by the nation-wide hysteria unleashed by an actress's 'trauma' while shooting the British version of a reality show called *Big Brother*, when Shilpa Shetty was subjected to **racial slurs** and her housemates made fun of her 'Indian accent'. Instead of shedding tears, Shilpa should've spoken to them mimicking their cockney lilt. When it comes to our *dil* (the one Raj Kapoor glorified so generously), we are still over-sensitive.

As I am, I acknowledge. Especially while travelling internationally. If an immigration officer is less than cordial, my instant feeling is 'Oh ... that's because of my Indian passport.' Maybe the officer had had a fight with a spouse ... suffered a bad hair day? Why did I take it so personally? Ditto for on-board service when most Indian passengers convince themselves that those big-built blonde stewardesses are being snide and vicious, simply because



they detest the thought of 'serving' us darkies. Worse ... they hate clearing up after 'dirty Indians', since they 'know' we aren't properly 'toilet-trained'.

But, given the staggering number of Indian tourists jetting around the world these days, most international airlines are frantically recruiting our folks to cater to our special meals and other requirements. Hopefully, that should take care of the problem of racism in the years to come ...

Just as my heart went out to those waiters in Agra, as they naively went about 'pleasing' that motley group of foreigners staring disbelievingly at the peculiar X'mas dinner and shaking their heads, I feel for aliens in our country eager to belong.

11

It took less than twenty-four hours for the situation to reverse, when we found ourselves on the *Shatabdi* train taking us from Agra to Delhi. The compartment was full of foreign tourists, since the *Shatabdi* is the most sensible way of travelling between the two cities. Remember, our three great World-Heritage-Sites destination does not have a commercial airport!

A few charter flights get there, but that's it! You want to see the Taj? Take a train. Or drive. Unbelievable, but true. The excuse offered is that we don't have the numbers! *What?* India's biggest symbol doesn't attract numbers? Can that possibly be true? Or is it that the numbers stay away because the numbers know the town is a dump?

As the train rolled out of the station, I settled into my reclining chair and found a convenient plug point next to

my seat to charge my mobile phone. I'd beaten an American woman and her desi-trying-to-be-*phirang* boyfriend to it. They needed to plug in their laptop. I gloated childishly and ignored their glares. Across the aisle, a black guy dozed on the shoulders of an oriental female companion. **Everybody seemed Taj-ed out.** Within minutes of the train gathering speed, an army of neatly-dressed waiters in clean uniforms invaded the compartment and offered piping hot tomato soup with crisp breadsticks and mini-packets of butter.

12

I pounced on it, as did my husband—**tomato soup for the soul**, on a bitterly cold winter evening ... perfect. Second helpings were announced by the cheerful fellows, before they brought trays laden with lip-smacking chicken curry-rice. There was military precision to the entire operation. Suddenly, the sleepy, exhausted foreigners were wide awake and attacking the food! I turned to my husband and said, 'See? Look at our hospitality ... what do you get on those fancy trains in Europe? A lousy ham-and-cheese sandwich ... and you have to pay for it! What does any domestic airline in the US serve even on long-distance flights? Ditch-water coffee and limp cookies—if that.' I asked for an extra portion of *raita*, and got it promptly. I deliberately made a ceremony of licking my lips and declaring audibly how fantastic the meal was. So, when cups of ice cream arrived, I was ready to cheer loudly and urge others to do the same.

I know this must sound ridiculous, but India needs its cheerleaders, even if that involves a kiddish demo of national

pride on a train that serves delicious chicken curry. If we can get that right ... what stops us from extending the chicken-curry example to other areas?

By the time we got to our over-the-top suite at an opulent hotel in Delhi, it was close to midnight. As we walked in and surveyed the plush detailing of the place, my heart soared yet again. I 'became' a fussy foreigner: My first trip to 'Indi-errrr'. I didn't know what to expect. Since I was ignorant and prejudiced, I'd also carried a lot of baggage with me—mental baggage. My *Lonely Planet* had provided some info, but I had to check it out for myself. Wow! This place wasn't half-bad. In fact, it was rather splendid! Almost like a good hotel back home ... hmmm—look at that ... real silk upholstery ... and feather-touch panels to draw the curtains. I bounced around on the bed ... yes, a good night's sleep was guaranteed.

13

Now for the bathroom survey. Oops! A large window next to the enormous tub ... large *and see-through*! What about privacy? Let's ask the butler. He shows up and demonstrates the lowering of a screen. But it's still see-through. The butler smiles and bows. Maybe the natives feel differently about privacy issues. Maybe Indians conduct their ablutions in public view ... like those pictures of naked holy men taking a dip in some holy river. Weird!

I snapped back into my original self. It *was* weird. Maybe, I said to myself, this design element was picked by a foreign consultant for foreigners. Because nobody I knew in India would sit on a potty in full view of whosoever was in the

adjoining bedroom. Other than that eccentricity, it was a perfect space—not oppressively Indian or exòtic, and yet unmistakably Asian in its sensibilities. Clever! And so good to be able to communicate in English to every single staffer, starting with the strapping Sikh gentleman opening car doors in the foyer.

14 English or Hindi. Today, it's near impossible to encounter an English-speaking waiter/waitress in Britain, Europe or America. They are generally new recruits from the former Soviet Union—good-looking, definitely, but speaking in thick, incomprehensible accents. They probably work doubly hard and earn half the wages, but it's mighty difficult to order a simple meal or even get an ironing board without acting it out. I remember my recent frustration when, even after an elaborate pantomime, what arrived twenty minutes later was a kettle. The Russian-speaking room service attendant who resembled Kournikova hadn't understood a word I'd said.

Our hotels score big-time, even if our tariffs have gone through the roof. First-timers to Mumbai complain constantly about the killer rates charged by five-star hotels here. But once they've experienced our legendary service and food, they stop cribbing and start recommending India visits to skeptical colleagues back home.

'Can't you get rid of those beggars ...? Why can't the government *do* something?' The minute a foreigner dares to step out of the sanitized, protected environment of a five-star hotel and into the mean streets of Mumbai he/she becomes fair game—a soft target. Beggars, pimps and

assorted touts pounce on the person, who gets physically pulled in ten different directions. Maimed kids, lepers, drunks, drug addicts, peddlers ... take your pick.

They descend in droves, overwhelming and intimidating even the most seasoned traveller. Imagine if we recoil from that encounter ourselves, how must it be for strangers? Now that we know that beggars come under the organized sector, and work systematically for other beggars who control territories, how long can people feel sorry?

I know a couple of German acquaintances, who were so shell-shocked when they tried going for a walk along Mumbai's famed Marine Drive, just a few metres from their fabulous hotel, that they turned around and ran back, shaking with fright. They told me later that they threw up on reaching their room, stripped off the 'polluted' clothes, packed them roughly into plastic bags and discarded the lot. They instantly changed their travel itinerary and took the next flight home, vowing never to return. I'm sure there have been countless such instances.

15

At one level, I can empathize, even as I find myself getting angry. It is unfair—unfair to tourists, unfair to stay-at-homes. Often, I roll down the windowpane of my car and try to reason with the pests thumping aggressively on the window. I could be jolted from deep sleep by the insistent knocking, or merely annoyed at being disturbed while reading or making a call. Nothing works. I could as well be talking to a wall. **The expression in their eyes is cold and ruthless ('Take that, you rich bitch!'), or**

**impassive and dull ('Just give me a buck and shut the fuck up ...').** Either way, who's the loser? Me! 'Us'. People in cars. People with good clothes ... money ... the *seth log*, who don't care, don't bother, about the *gareeb* ... selfish, heartless people. True, in a way. It's a question of whose perspective you see it from.

'Don't feel sorry for these buggers ... in the old days, they'd beg from a distance. Now, they bang on the car. Tomorrow, they'll feel bolder ... maybe they'll throw a rock ... drag you out and strip off your jewellery,' warned a friend. Maybe.

16 There is the flip-side. Often, the tiny tots selling flowers or books at traffic signals barely come up to the window. A small hand is raised, clutching *gajras* of fragrant jasmine, or a bunch of paper Indian flags. Soon, a grubby face follows ... the kid is on tip-toe and staring at a shiny object on the car seat ... perhaps a glistening mobile phone or an iPod. Sometimes, the fascination is reserved for the watch on the wrist, or pretty bangles. There's no attempt to sell or beg.

It's naked voyeurism, as the child stares unblinkingly and then melts away as the light changes to green. It is heart-breaking and poignant. Sometimes, you see teenage mothers, children themselves, with infants strapped to their chests in improvised slings made out of old sarees. The matted hair, hollow eyes and twig-like bodies suggest disease and malnutrition—perhaps, full-blown AIDS. The infant with a bloated belly is barely alive. There is no hope for either mother or child.

They stand like pathetic reminders of our national shame, under gigantic billboards proclaiming proudly, 'India Poised'. '2008 is India's Moment'. Poised for what? The moment celebrating which aspect of ourselves? The sexy Sensex? The booming economy? Our IT triumphs?

You watch the intrepid kids darting between whizzing limos, deftly avoiding motorcyclists and autorickshaws, a monster BEST bus ... often they're singing the latest Bollywood hit '*Krazy Kiya Re ...*' and shaking their hips to the rhythm. Where does that enviable spirit come from?

Where does that  
enviable spirit  
come from? How  
come I don't  
smile, sing or  
dance as much?

17

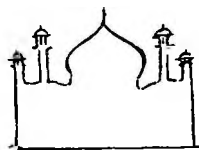
How come I don't smile, sing or dance as much? How come I'm the one with the ferocious frown, the snarl, the snappy attitude, the harsh voice, the hard look? After all, I'm also the one with the latest phone, laptop and car?

It's raining outside ... I'm dry inside my midnight-blue Mercedes, listening to Buddhist chants to calm my frayed nerves. The driver, Shambhu, is a good family man who keeps his eyes on the road and his mouth shut. Just the way I've trained him.

I'm dressed in a gorgeous saree. I'm meeting close friends at a trendy Japanese restaurant, my watch is a Cartier ... by any standards, I'm privileged ... well off ... comfortable ... successful. And yet, it's those wet kids, shivering under the relentless Mumbai monsoon, clad in

Shobhaa Dé

rags, with no certainty of the next meal, who are laughing.  
*Maybe, they are laughing at me?*





Children know  
the truth.  
Why question  
miracles?



I guess I knew the truth as a child, myself. I was in my mother's womb when India became free. I was born exactly one year and nineteen days before we became a republic. I feel very privileged when I think of that—I was born in Free India. My parents' fourth and last child. I am as old as my country, give or take a few months. And, on many levels, I feel not only that I have seen a dramatic change taking place in sixty years, but that in some sweet, strange and simple way, I *am* the change. I am India.

When I say that to my children, they look at me in a way that suggests they think I'm nuts. How would they know or understand? They've taken virtually everything I had to earn for granted. Including India's prosperity. They don't connect with poverty ... it's an alien concept that has never touched their pampered existence. While I was never 'poor', I certainly experienced deprivation. I did not starve like so many million people of my generation. But I was acutely aware that I'd have to work hard—very hard—for my perks. And when I did get something special from my parents, I valued it, cherished it ... as I do everything I have to this date. Nothing was taken for granted—from the occasional pink pastry in my lunch box in school ... to the

frilly pink frock on my second birthday. I can still taste the buttery icing ... and feel the stiffness of the taffeta frills scraping against the tender skin of my knees. These are memories I hold precious because I know what they signified in our uncomplicated lives. I know they involved a few sacrifices, I know my father thought of both indulgences as being far too extravagant. Perhaps my older siblings felt the same since their birthdays were never celebrated on this scale. Our family of six, living in 'government quarters', could not afford such 'useless luxuries' (my father's words for anything that went beyond 'basics'—food, education, shelter, clothes). But even in that era change was afoot. My father's move from a district court in Satara to North Block in New Delhi was the single most crucial factor in our family's path to progress. Everything changed, the moment our train pulled into New Delhi station and we made our first home in what was called 'Man Nagar' in those days.

I was an  
impatient,  
restless child,  
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that extra  
something—and  
getting it. Quite  
like India

I was an impatient, restless child, always seeking that extra something—and getting it. Quite like India, negotiating for better terms for all the monumental loans needed to get the country up and running. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru was my father's hero (far more than Mahatma Gandhi), and retained that elevated status, till my father

passed away a few months short of his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday. My father, G.H. Rajadhyaksha, had witnessed more history in the making than most human beings do. He'd monitored each milestone, with a keenness that was characteristic of his razor-sharp mind, till the very end. We often spoke about the India he grew up in as a schoolboy, but that India didn't interest him half as much as today's India. He preferred discussing how IT had transformed our lives, and was a great admirer of Dr Abdul Kalam, whom he frequently quoted. Attempts to get him into a nostalgic frame of mind were never successful, for he was so plugged into the present and dreaming of a glorious future—yes, even in his nineties. Perhaps it is this upbeat attitude towards India that has shaped my own mindset.

23

I often stand by the railing of the balcony in our apartment in south Mumbai, watching the sun go down into the Arabian Sea. I invariably touch my forehead and say a small prayer when it finally disappears modestly in a pale pink haze. I never think of this magical moment as the end of a day, it's more a promise of another one to dawn a few hours later. Sometimes, I think of myself as I was during adolescence, living not too far from the area we now call home. I love what I see around me! I love the options and opportunities that beckon and I love the thought that if nothing goes wrong, I'll be around to see our country rising like the sun, in all its majesty ... seeing another Golden Era, this one even better and more glorious than the one of Emperor Ashoka's time, when the Gupta dynasty ruled over vast swathes of the country and India resembled

a lush garden in full bloom. Such a flowering is not beyond us even today, **provided we don't blow it!**

\*

24 'It's all happening here,' a dazzlingly beautiful Italian woman said to me, as we sipped tea together. Her husband, an aggressive investment banker from The City, was in Mumbai on a recce. The lovely lady was doing her own thing—apartment-hunting, checking out the shopping, looking around to judge that most ephemeral of attributes—quality of life. 'I love the buzz in your city,' she said, adding, 'Delhi is too box-like and controlled ... but I feel free in Mumbai.' I glowed at the compliment, and took it very personally. In the past, I might've gone a bit overboard praising the metropolis and drawing her attention to its many hidden qualities and virtues. But not anymore. Mumbai, I realized instinctively, didn't need any hardsell. And neither did India. It was there—like the sea is there—take it or leave it. Most people are grabbing it—with both hands. Why? What has changed? Mumbai still stinks. It is filthy. It is crude and aggressive. It is loud and violent. The roads are awful, the distances daunting. And yet ... Mumbai makes your heart race ... you find yourself walking just that much faster here ... you push yourself that much harder. And then you ask yourself, 'Why?' No logical answer.

I smiled as my newly-acquired Italian friend talked about her passion for exotic destinations ... fabulous homes ... and that forced me to ask myself—if not India, then where?

I had the answer—nowhere! Sounds mawkish and cheesy, but I am on that intense level of commitment and I realize how irrational that must appear, even to other Indians. ‘What’s so great about India?’ students often challenge me, and I look at them like they’re crazy to ask! Would I ever consider relocating? The answer is obvious. Have I ever considered it? Never. For better or worse, **this is where I belong. This is where I want to be.** I told my visitor the same, and she smiled a knowing smile, ‘Family is still such a strong force in India ... that’s what makes your country so attractive.’ I reserved my wry response to that observation. As an Italian, she, too, was drawn to family ... which is why she’d married and had two kids in quick succession. As she put it, ‘I see lonely single women all over Europe and I feel so sorry for them ... and then I come to India and see families ... children ... grandparents ... uncles and aunts.’ I almost believed her! That’s the way it once was, I wanted to interject, but even that is changing—has changed. India is going global, you see. And in our hurry to win the global badge of recognition, we are throwing a lot of what is our core strength straight out of the window.

25

After she left, the image of myself clad in my pink frilly frock (pink shoes to match) kept coming back ... and I thought, what took me a couple of years to demand, has taken India sixty! India is currently wearing that frilly pink frock and preening, as I’d once done in 1950. The pink frock became a sweet symbol of aspiration and hope, even a certain flirtation with the future. Unlike a lot of my

26 contemporaries who lost faith in the country and fled to the West seeking a 'superior' education, better career opportunities or a higher quality of life, I chose to stick it out, come hell or high water. Not because I am a super patriot, but I somehow 'knew' I'd get a better deal from my own country down the line. I'm a survivor and like most survivors, I enjoy risks. I had several tempting offers to explore attractive options overseas. My 'inner voice' told me to hang on, stay put. I'm glad I listened to it, more than to the cacophony of departing friends and relatives. Today, those very people are wondering how to get back ... reconnect. For a few, it's already too late. The daunting thought of re-locating at a certain age prevents them from jumping on the first plane East. Senior citizens stuck in distant lands have suddenly woken up to the grim realities of facing old age in either a state-run facility or a hospice, depending on the kindness of strangers. Well, I feel like telling them that if they postpone that decision by even a few years (like, five), they'll probably face the same bitter truth back in India.

Gotta permit?

They say home is where the heart is (forget hearth). The skeptics who abandoned ship in the '60s no longer know where either home or heart is. 'We are Americans,' they once used to boast, proudly telling us deprived folks about the glory that is the USA. Armed with work permits and



green cards, they'd arrive for their annual 'staying in touch with the motherland' trips, with countless complaints on their lips. The tirade would begin at the airport, starting with inefficient baggage handlers and going on to bumpy rides over pot-holed roads. 'Nothing works in India,' they'd sniff, cribbing about 'basics' that they'd taken so much for granted in their adopted country. During the short duration of their stay here, one would have to put up with glowing accounts of their life 'there', and how impossible, even intolerable, India had become. 'It's getting from bad to worse,' they'd repeat, criticizing everything from corruption, bribery, cleanliness issues, inquisitiveness of neighbours, and the overall '*chalta hai*' attitude.

**And yet, all those saved up dollars would be invested in Indian banks,** since the returns were far higher. And the suitcases would be crammed on departure with essentials that were far cheaper. The rest of us would be made to feel diminished on several counts for lacking the 'guts' to pick up lives anew in the land of milk and honey. On those rare visits to their part of the world, we *dehatis* would be given a crash course on how to behave in the First World. If we dared to ask a few obvious questions like, 'How come you guys only hang around with other desis ... the sort of people you'd shun back home? What do you have in common with so-and-so ...?' our questions would be silenced. But it is true that the actual lack of acceptance by the host country is what is making a lot of NRIs (Non-Resident Indians) rethink that original decision. The party's over ... but sorry ... nobody wants late-

comers to the one happening in India, either.

Do I sound cussed? So be it. I see their kids and wonder what will happen to these twenty- and thirty-somethings who, through decisions taken by their ambitious parents, are a lost lot, desperately in search of an identity to call their own. They speak strong, accented English and eat 'curry' at home as a Sunday treat (that is, if Mom doesn't recommend a barbecue). When they come to India, they feel entirely excluded from their peers, who are busy leading their own, far more colourful lives. Also, earning as much, if not more than their American/British cousins. No wonder, then, I find so many friends of my children, who were once seen as whiz kids and people in the fast track, packing their bags and coming home to start all over again. Their love affair with the West over, a few are married to foreign girls, who loathe the unfamiliar—particularly the fact that they have to get used to the idea of dealing with assorted 'aunties' and 'uncles', often sharing an apartment with in-laws and switching to 'pure vegetarian' kitchens. They are advised by family elders to 'adjust'. Easier said. **'Adjust' is a favourite word in India, and is used across the board, even by those who barely speak intelligible English.**

'It is important for young people to adjust,' my Gujarati vegetable vendor tells me sagely, pointing to his own son, who has bleached his hair, pierced his ear lobes and is wearing extra-tight jeans. 'Adjust' is not such an awful word, come to think of it. It is practical and non-threatening. **Most Indians are like elastic bands, ready to**

**stretch themselves or shrink, depending on circumstances.** We've been doing that for centuries. We've 'adjusted' to so much dramatic change without the rubber band snapping! I consider it a major feat in itself. With a jaunty shake of our heads, and a ready smile (often, for no reason), we 'adjust' and the Ganga flows on ... or, at any rate, it used to ... before the river got hopelessly clogged and polluted.

\*

For today's stressed-out India, the one that's strutting, preening and showing off its pink frock, the story is reading differently. I see fewer smiles and far many more scowls. People look preoccupied and grumpy, when they're supposed to be over-the-moon with unbridled joy, celebrating the country's prosperity and progress. It is a paradox, really. Here we are, reluctant debutantes at our own coming-out party. The ball gown has been created by a top designer (an IT mogul, in case you're wondering) and we are all ready to rock—or are we? Then why the scowls?

29

**The trouble is Indians aren't used to being prosperous. We are more comfortable dealing with poverty—after all, poverty is a staple here, and has been for centuries.** Once the British departed, after looting our wealth, stripping us of our many assets, India was left a bankrupt nation, hopelessly in debt and having to deal with the daunting task of feeding its hungry

millions. Mahatma Gandhi's obdurate attitude at the time (all that money given to Pakistan, almost like returning the *mehr* after a traumatic *talaq*) left us with empty coffers and equally empty stomachs.

30 That we succeeded brilliantly in becoming self-sufficient within a few decades is nothing short of a miracle. The Green Revolution did the trick, and successive governments realized that growling tumtums can only cause trouble—and lead to rebellion. That four-letter word ('food') dominated our consciousness, and to a large extent, still does. Something as primal as food—or the lack of it—remains the number one concern, even of well-fed middle-class India. It's a memory that refuses to go away—the spectre of starvation continues to loom years after our aggressive efforts to keep famine at bay have paid off. Yes, people in the millions still starve in rural India. But the urban Indian with the permanent grouch has no business to be sulking in this regard. And yet, behind even that paunchy businessman's satisfied burp after a heavy meal is the niggling fear—what if this food disappears all of a sudden? What if I can't feed my family? What if famine returns? Irrational and unjustified as this fear appears, it is there. Middle-class smugness has not been able to address it so far. And like most irrational thoughts, this one, too, refuses to go away. Despite the economic boom, most Indians continue to think of India as a 'poor' country. Show them facts and figures, throw statistics in their faces—zilch—they'll nod their heads but remain unconvinced.

**We have become so used to the idea of poverty**

**as a national affliction that we've started accepting it. Almost as if it's our collective fate.** Sometimes, when I'm dining with the super-rich of our country in surroundings so opulent they would make a sheikh blush, I'm amused to see the host nervously counting pennies, worrying whether there's 'enough' food on the table. Or, whether there's too much of it. 'Waste is bad,' I've heard a card-holding billionaire declare while counting the number of chicken sandwiches on board his private jet. This sort of frugality, in all its absurdity, is easy to understand. It has nothing to do with how much wealth an individual has—in this particular case, one hell of a lot. It has more to do with the in-built insecurity of losing it all and going back to square one. To the time of our fathers and grandfathers.

31

I grew up with pretty much the same dread, the same panic, even if I never ever had to face food-deprivation. I understood the challenge posed to my father to ensure his four strapping children, with healthy appetites, ate well on a bureaucrat's modest salary. In concentrating on providing the basics—clean clothes, hot food and a good education—both he and my mother sacrificed many goodies themselves. And to their credit, never complained about or grudged it. My mother made do with two 'good' silk sarees and the same small pieces of gold jewellery she'd received at the time of her wedding. My father also had two 'good' suits in his cupboard and wore them with a great deal of personal style. The meals on our dining table were always wholesome, simple and tasty—standard Maharashtrian fare, low on oil—far from gooey or rich,

but served on time with a loving smile by my mother. Mutton curries were a Sunday treat, along with fried pieces of pomfret or prawns. We knew better than to ask for those expensive dishes mid-week!

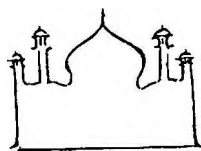
When I see my kids turning up their noses at our over-laden dining table these days, I feel angry and hurt. They have no business to be complaining. I see their expressions and flip out. I see packets of imported foods (Oreo cookies being my current bugbear) and I lose it. But I know better than to deliver a lecture on waste—they'd probably laugh derisively. Not because they're insensitive—it's just that they take food far more for granted than I ever did, or will. It is a 'basic'; their birthright. But I often wonder whether they too believe that the foie gras may run out some day ... and then what?

\*

And then, it will be time to get off their butts and work much harder, if they want to maintain this readymade lifestyle they believe is theirs by right. 'Please don't preach,' they beg of me, when they see 'that' look in my eyes. I know better than to fall into that trap. I think of all the countless privileges young, affluent Indians take so much for granted, and wonder whether India is really going platinum! The Golden Age is several centuries behind us. We don't need a reminder. **It's platinum and titanium that rules. And plastic of course.** My youngest child, when asked what she wanted for her eighteenth birthday,

didn't miss a beat before saying, 'A credit card.' When I gasped at her audacity, she smiled, 'Be thankful I didn't say "A BMW", like one of my friends did.' I thought of all the things I'm supposed to feel thankful about and got quite cross. An eighteen-year-old brat asking for one of the world's most expensive cars. 'Earn it,' I said haughtily, but I know I sounded like a loser.

With all this going for them—why the frowns of frustration? Why the stress? Why don't these kids look happy? Is the silver platter the wrong shape? Am I being a cynical bitch?







Am I a  
Tight-assed  
Schoolmarm?



Sometimes, the spouses young Indians from abroad bring home to Mummyji and Daddyji are colleagues from their workplace—Chinese-Americans, Hispanics, Europeans, Australians. They find it impossible to ‘adjust’, since they aren’t desi elastic bands from birth. Their reluctance/resistance to ‘conforming’ to family rules leads to ongoing friction, starting with over-spiced ‘curries’ and over-rich *gajar halwa*, to eating with their fingers, forgoing knives and forks. Sharing ‘space’, physical as well as emotional, snowballing into an all-out war. ‘That’s what stresses us out,’ they chorus when I pester them ... and I shake my head like a wise old woman (the way my grandmother once did).

Bollywood advocates *masti* to deal with this stress-business. All youth-oriented ads recommend *masti*, and all I can think of is kids who’ve got too much, too soon and value nothing—the *Neo Indians*—brash, impatient, aggressive and ignorant. Like their worst counterparts in the West. Obsessed with brands and labels. Thinking nothing of demanding the latest Fendi bag for a sixteenth birthday (at 80,000 bucks, that’s quite a gift—three decades ago, one could buy a two-bedroom flat with that, and my father did, after taking a loan, if you please). Then I ask

myself whether I'm being a bit too judgemental and schoolmarmish, moralistic and tight-assed ..., just like my elders who were forever 'disapproving'. I don't recall a single thing I did during my tempestuous teens that met with their approval. I hated them—they hated me. We knew exactly where we stood. Today, it's more difficult to take a position. We parents want to appear more 'chilled out' in our children's eyes. We know they are secretly laughing at our clumsy attempts to be 'cool'. But hey—at least we're trying!

**India has to make up its mind on this score—how does it rate on the current cool quotient? I'd say, pretty high.** Neo-Indians are highly enamoured of the relaxed attitude. They can identify with it far more than my generation could condone the hypocrisies of the pseudo-socialists who preached Gandhian austerity but lived like kings. Am I equally guilty? Neo-Indians love extravagance. *Splurge* is the bold name of a weekend supplement that encourages readers to indulge without guilt. Another magazine is devoted to spas and spa treatments, some of which are pegged at Rs 6,000 an hour ('cheap by New York standards,' says a friend). That used to be, till just two decades ago, the average pay cheque for a salaried professional who'd put in at least ten years of service. I remember my own exultation when I crossed the important Rs 5,000-barrier. I really thought I'd become a millionaire. Today, my driver earns much more than that. And chances are, given half a chance, my young daughters would blow that amount in a single night on the town—in

fact, the youngest did just that on New Year's Eve. She didn't blink when asking for the money. I nearly wept while giving it to her.

I could have said 'no'. But I didn't. Was I buying peace? Bribing her? Taking the easy way out? If I felt strongly about the issue, I could've put my foot down and delivered a lecture on Gandhi's sacrifice. What would I have achieved? A big fat zero. 'Everybody is going . . . that's the cover charge . . . how come they can and I can't?' Flashback to the early '70s. 'Everybody's going . . . that's the cover charge . . . how come they can and I can't?' My voice. An echo in reverse. The difference is in the zeroes. Ha ha ha, my children laugh. So what has changed? It's only a matter of scale . . . not principles. They are right. And I feel like an even bigger hypocrite.

39

Sometimes, when I reluctantly participate in those meaningless TV debates on the New India or Sexy India, I feel like an imposter. Most of the other panellists arrive with personal agendas. They are there to push away . . . plug their latest product, be it a movie, ad, spiritual mantra or political goal. And me? I'm there to add two vital elements: 1) the token female perspective and 2) a dash of colour/glamour. All of us bleat away on how fantastic it feels to be an Indian today. How amazing it is that the world is finally recognizing our real worth and giving us 'respect'. I feel depressed at the end of all the chest-thumping. And ask myself how much of this new strut is self-delusionary. Whom are we kidding? And, by trotting them out often enough, will we really start believing our own illusions

about ourselves?

40 I did two similar shows in the span of a week. Both had heavyweights and people loosely described as ‘opinion-makers’ (do these individuals have day jobs, too?) on the panel. The audience was made up of a strange mix—activists, ad gurus, cranks and *faltus*. Again, people with a lot of time on their hands, and a desperate desire to be considered important enough to be invited. As frequently happens, most speakers stuck to safe territories and politically correct points of view. It was a dull and listless effort that did no justice to the Sexy India or the Sexy Indians we were asked to discuss. The audience participation was tepid and it looked as if rigor mortis had set in. On one show, we attempted in vain to find a suitable Indian Icon. In another, we wondered about India’s ‘wow’ factor.

As we strenuously argued about our country’s countless merits and virtues, a few protesting voices ruined the party by bringing up the ‘p’-word (poverty).

Everyone bristled—here we were, the well-heeled and the well-educated, grandly discussing our country’s newly-acquired halo—how dare anybody tarnish it? An articulate ‘guru’ spoke in an indeterminate American/Telugu accent about exporting our spiritualism and yoga to the West. Like he’d just discovered the next big thing after antibiotics. Uncomfortable questions from the audience regarding the plight of the poor farmers, the lack of education, the denial of basic rights, the absence of electricity, drinking water and sanitation in large tracts of the same country were stonewalled by all. It was hosannahs that we were

programmed to hear. Only hosannahs, without pauses for breath or reality checks in place. We heaped praise on ourselves shamelessly, and the small voices of dissent from the audience were effectively silenced by cocky anchors in smart grey suits. Yes, I was part of the pantomime and, while it lasted, it was fun.

Driving back, I thought of all the things I could have said, should have said ... the standard regrets post any TV show, where the best comebacks and repartees do the vanishing act when the cameras are rolling and vividly spring to mind micro-seconds after wrap-up.

As I lay awake that night, troubled by my own lacklustre performance, I thought how absurd the whole thing was. Which 'India' were we talking about, anyway? There are thousands and thousands of Indias—each one as valid as the other. Each one as complete or incomplete, too. The India we were lauding forms but a microcosm of this vast land. It is the India of the elite, the privileged, the affluent. The only India we want the rest of the world to see and acknowledge, because we are so damned ashamed of the other. Ashamed and ignorant. We want to carefully crop out all those unflattering, ugly details that spoil the picture. Like when my husband and I got a photo-studio to cut out intrusive images of unattractive overweight tourists, spoiling the pretty frame

Which 'India'  
were we talking  
about, anyway?  
There are  
thousands of  
Indias

of the two of us sitting on the famous 'love bench' in front of the Taj Mahal.

42

That was it—I got my answer. **All of us on those panels you listen to at prime time are doing just that—*Photo-Shopping India***, cutting out all that displeases us and highlighting the best parts. Like a *Vogue* photo shoot for the prestigious X'mas issue, where a supermodel's smallest flaws are taken care of by experts in the art department. In a way, it is a sweet and naïve attempt on our part. We genuinely want India to look pretty—no, gorgeous—after decades of negative imaging in the international press. Nothing wrong with that. Except for the danger inherent in our cheesy sentimentality—we are actually air-brushing all that we don't wish to acknowledge. Every flaw, every wart, every pimple, is carefully touched up. Now, that's really a short-sighted strategy. It's like a flat-chested starlet letting her falsies fall out mid-dance. Here we are, gloating about how great we look on world-screens, when in reality we are camouflaging the fact that we have dirty, hairy armpits and much else that's pretty ugh about us.

If we don't stop this game of 'Let's Pretend We Are Perfect', we are going to end up with our feet stuck in quicksand. An act, no matter how clever it is, remains an act. A trick that can't be sustained over a long period of time. People see through the charade—and laugh! Do we want the world to laugh at us, two years ... five years ... ten years down the line? Think about it.

\*



As I hope all our newly-minted billionaires recognized by the *Forbes*' team will do each time they visit the Temple of Greed at Davos. What must their counterparts think, as our tycoons arrive in spiffy corporate jets, their wives wearing floor-length mink coats and sporting serious diamonds? Do those jaded European/American business legends look at our in-your-face flash and exchange knowing looks? Or do they see opportunity? Am I being defensive or is the truth even worse? Does India need more Narayanmurthys or should we clone Brothers Ambani? The former presents a stark contrast, preferring to flaunt his man-of-the-masses story, insisting he cleans his own toilet and sweeps his house, even though he's ranked amongst the richest men in the world, with Infosys being seen as a flag-bearer for India's IT fairytale.

43

On the other hand, Brothers Ambani live in a palatial residence not far from where I stay. It's official: they *are* the richest Indians. They live rich. As they are expected to. The all-important 'wow' factor hits you in the driveway itself and extends well into the areas which are reserved for entertaining guests—from the dean of Stanford to Bill Clinton. You are made aware in no uncertain terms that you are in a rich man's home—a *very* rich man's. Every detail underlines that—from the dozens of liveried staff, to the opulence of the private movie theatre, apart from the priceless art on the walls and the perfectly tended tropical garden on the terrace. Even jaded foreign guests gasp at the opulence. Especially first-timers to India. 'Gosh ... we could never have imagined ...' they trail off. Guess what?

Neither could we! The Ambani success story is an extraordinary one by any standards. They are the Rockefellers of India—let's face it. Admirers call them gutsy. Critics prefer 'ruthless'. Either way, the Ambanis have rewritten the rules. Business will never be the same again.

44 So ... which of these billionaires represents the New India? Narayanmurthy, with his deliberate downplaying of personal wealth, his unassuming mannerisms and unremarkable appearance? Or the Ambani style that reeks of excess? How should this India represent itself at world fora of the high-profile kind? Should the attractive ladies of these billionaires dress down for the occasion, go easy on the bling? Or say 'to hell with it', and dazzle as only they can? Should the men cling on to the old stereotypes of Gandhian restraint, and stick to *khadi bandgalas*? ('Be gone, ye hypocrites! Your time is long over.') Or join their wives and indulge in an over-the-top display of serious wealth? Is there a via media? Will those other international captains of industry in bespoke suits secretly snigger at our attempts at one-up-man-ship? Or will they sit back and say, 'All right! Those Indian buggers have done it—let's hand it to them.'

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My husband and I were invited to spend a few days in St Moritz. We jumped at the chance, since it's the sort of destination we wouldn't go out of our way to discover. We don't ski. And we don't gamble. There's nothing much else

to do in this divinely decadent resort town, unless you enjoy deer-hunting or hiking in the Alps. We decided to snoop around instead, especially since we were told there was a gigantic chateau under construction in the poshest area overlooking the lake St Moritz and it belonged to 'some Indian'. We knew it was Laxmi Mittal's grand Alpine residence and expressed our wish to drive by and take a look. But more than merely clicking touristy pix of the property, I was interested in knowing the residents' perceptions on the brown-skinned 'intruder' in their midst. Was he welcome in the tiny, closed society that attracted the likes of Agnelli and the Monaco royals? Surprisingly enough, Mittal got a clean chit—his money was more than welcome. And he had worked his famous charm on the villagers himself by hanging around at the world-famous whisky bar and chatting informally with whosoever approached him. He'd gone about acquiring his dream home in the right way, without alienating neighbours. Oh . . . his noisy parties? Well . . . with DJs from London playing Bollywood tracks and tandoori food arriving over Alpine highways by the truckloads to feed his 500-strong celebrity guests . . . it was enough to impress even the blasé St Moritz regulars!

45

Vicariously pleased by the recognition accorded to 'one of us', we didn't stop to ask ourselves just how much of a bonafide Indian Mittal actually is. Of course, he's of Indian origin, but he lives and works out of London. His business interests cover the world, but so far, he has yet to bring his money to India. And yet, we want to claim him as a son of

the soil, and continue to heap national honours on the man whose own ambition seems to begin and end with a peerage. With reports of a hefty donation to Britain's Labour Party, Mittal appears to want to become a Lord shortly. Well, good for him. Perhaps that honour will thrill us enough to bestow half-a-dozen other awards on an absentee Indian. Such is our eagerness to 'own' successful Indians, sometimes against their will.

46 For years, we've gone on and on about '*aapro* Zubin', sounding sickeningly foolish in the bargain. Zubin Mehta is definitely one of the world's greatest conductors, and he enjoys going native when he comes to India once every few years. But he has lived overseas for most of his life, is married to an American actress, and has carved out a spectacular niche for myself in his chosen field. Yet, each time he flies in, the media goes crazy covering his every move, and acting altogether proprietorial about the man. Of course, he's Parsee (born one), and of course he loves India. Why shouldn't he? Look at how passionately India loves him! Such a pity that we don't reserve even half the adulation Zubin gets for indigenous musicians in our backyard, who are also world-famous and as successful—people like Hari Prasad Chaurasia or Bhimsen Joshi. Why? Because they remain as desi as desi *ghee*. They dress Indian, talk Indian, walk Indian, eat Indian (*paan*, horror of horrors!), think Indian, feel Indian.

How uncool!

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Back to the same annoying, frustrating question: Who is the *real* Indian here and which the *real* India? Mahesh Bhatt is one person who can be counted on to provoke, and frequently provide, a great take on the subject. We were together on a panel discussion in which Bhatt came up with an interesting perspective on professional ethics involving an impoverished boatman. Bhatt got talking to this person who narrated the story of his life—three generations before him had done exactly what he was doing: they ferried people from one shore to the other. Bhatt pointed to an impressive bridge that was being built, spanning the river. ‘What will you do once the bridge is ready ... how will you earn a livelihood?’ The boatman shook his head and replied, ‘I don’t know what I’ll do ... but so long as the bridge helps more people and makes it easier for them to get to the other shore, it’s a good thing.’ His story was met with thunderous applause—it had struck a chord in the audience. Everybody could relate to it with absolute ease. It made everyone comfortable knowing that our *great Indian values* were intact ... at least, in some small hamlet in the back of beyond.

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The irony of the situation didn’t strike anybody—how paradoxical it was for us to be praising the boatman’s unselfish declaration. How noble the man appeared. And so Indian! What did that make Bhatt, me and the others? Un-Indian? Selfish? Westernized? I guess so.

When we talk carelessly and foolishly about our great Indian values, what exactly are we referring to? I think I have some idea. We love the underdog. We worship failure

and loss. We adore martyrs. And we glorify austerity ... almost as much as we applaud *sacrifice*. God!, I hate that word. I've heard it often in my life, and have grown to detest its implications in our day-to-day interactions. 'Unless you sacrifice something, you won't understand the value of it ...' Says who? 'Unless you give up something for the good of the family/community/country, you'll never appreciate it.' 'As a wife/mother/daughter/sister, you must *sacrifice* a few things. After all, you're a woman ...' 'Our country will never progress unless more people learn the meaning of the word "sacrifice".' 'The more you sacrifice, the more you get.' 'Our leaders sacrificed so much, so that our country could be free ...' 'Mothers should never think of themselves—mothers must sacrifice.' 'Our culture is about sacrifice—look at Sita ... look at other mythological characters ... everybody sacrificed ...' Ugh! Ugh! Ugh! Sacrifice has become such an overused word, it is enough to convert the most giving Indian into a self-seeking monster. 'I sacrifice ... therefore, I am ... an Indian,' could well be our motto. And it impresses nobody.

Right now, the mood in India is anything but sacrificial. Young people think exclusively about themselves, their interests, their future. Why not? That is the prerogative of youth. If they don't focus on themselves, how will they compete ... get anywhere? And yet, the whole idea of sacrifice is still so strong, that across campuses, the person who preaches the virtues of sacrifice and tinsel patriotism gets the vote. The double standards and contradictions don't seem to bother anyone. Keeping their killer-instincts intact,

these students clap enthusiastically when that dreadful word 'sacrifice' is uttered.

*Traditional Indian Values*—is another bogus phrase that nobody seems to be able to define. What exactly are these mysterious 'values' and how different are they from the world's? We talk about respecting our elders, respecting family members, respecting authority, respecting teachers, respecting spiritual leaders, and so on. And on. But show me one culture, one society, that doesn't say exactly the same thing! Are Inuits averse to respecting their elders? Do the Japanese not respect community leaders? Would Australians harm

members of their family on purpose? Come on! The fact of the matter is that our society places an absurd premium on displaying this 'respect' for the benefit of others,

regardless of whether the governing sentiment is genuine or not. So long as one goes through the motions, it's fine ... we are keeping up our great values. Three cheers!

The same packaged 'respect' is generally the centrepiece in a majority of popular Hindi films—the moment youngsters (please ignore the biological age of the actors) 'misbehave' with their elders, audiences boo and start to tch, tch. The big lesson in *Baghban* was about a foster son doing what the nasty, loutish, flesh-and-blood offspring miserably failed to—look after ageing parents and show

What exactly are these mysterious 'values' and how different are they from the world's?

them adequate respect. With that, Salman Khan, the faux son, walked away with all the applause. Perhaps the film was intended as a wake-up call or a timely warning to the thirty-somethings of our *Bharat Mahaan*—neglect your old folks at your own peril, for in our culture, you'll be committing the biggest sin.

Not too many professionals in the fast track seem to have heeded the note of caution or even seen the film. There is currently a huge demand for Old Age Homes—it's perceived as a felt market need and those who provide a comfortable alternative at a good price will strike gold. In Mumbai, a canny politician and social worker called Pramod Navalkar (who died recently) came up with the idea of a 'Naana-Naani' park in one corner of the crowded Chowpatty Beach in central Mumbai. He'd seen how marginalized the older generation had become, with no physical space to call their own, and certainly no privileges. Pramod once told me, during a Republic Day march he organized for the elderly who were regulars at the park, that most of those senior citizens, participating so enthusiastically in a flag-hoisting ceremony inside 'their' park, were denied access even to the morning newspapers (and the loo) by their sons, daughters-in-law and grandkids and told to wait their turn patiently since they had 'nothing to do, anyway ...' Daily humiliations had become routine—can't use the phone, can't ask for tea or food when hungry, can't occupy any chair needed by someone more active, can't invite visitors in, can't use the bathroom till the others were done, can't watch TV without prior



permission and can't join in a conversation till asked to do so. If that sounded cruel and against Indian values—it certainly was so.

But ... Pramod shook his head sadly and said, 'Times have changed ... nobody wants old people these days ... the world belongs to the youth ...' At his pocket-sized park, all the oldie-goldies who hobbled across, often walking over two kilometres to get there, found companionship, newspapers, tea and sympathy, too! So successful was this model, that it was rapidly duplicated and funding began to trickle in. Kind-hearted strangers offered weekend trips, outings, picnics, snacks, movie dates, even fun events like talent contests and fashion shows. But the fact that Navalkar had forseen such a scenario is in itself rather terrifying. There was a time, not more than thirty years ago, when sons and their families assumed it was their duty to look after aged parents. Today, they frantically search the Net for services and accommodation, preferably at a distant hill-station, where visits are limited to once a month, if that.

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Old isn't gold

Most teenagers have little or no contact with their grandparents. The official excuse is 'Where's the time, *yaar*? We have our studies, tuitions, sports, movies, TV ...' This is why countless NGOs have sprung up during the last decade addressing the physical and emotional needs of deserted senior citizens. Scarier still are the physical threats

these vulnerable old people face, without any family to look after them. Newspapers are filled with grisly stories of eighty-year-old widows who have been brutally murdered in their own beds, often over ugly property disputes. ('How much longer do I have to wait for this old woman to die ...? I need the flat for my own family ...') There was a sad case of a slain widow, whose son lived in the very next building, but had not bothered to visit his mother for over two years! When asked why, by the press, he replied indifferently, 'Senior citizens must learn to look after themselves ... I have my own life to handle.' This sort of a brazen admission would've been considered unspeakably cruel in the 'old India'. Today, his words found many takers, as a poll demonstrated. 'It's true ... we feel bad ... but that's life,' a vast majority declared, much to the shock of the older generation.

It will take a while to get used to such callousness. But I'm not willing to take the chance. I'm making sure I'll never find myself in such helpless circumstances, by taking care of my hard-earned finances. I have informed my children of this well in advance, so they needn't be filled with dread at the prospect of having to take care of me down the line. These were issues one could take for granted in the past.

'It's all about loving your family,' Karan Johar's big movie hit *Kabhi Khushi, Kabhie Gham* declared, as audiences wept buckets across the country and overseas! The film had obviously tapped into our worst fears about ourselves—we were slowly but surely turning into a selfish,

hard and mercenary nation, motivated solely by personal goals and little beyond. Just like the Wicked West where children were virtually thrown out of the family home at the age of eighteen, and expected to fend for themselves, financially and psychologically. We used to say smugly, 'No wonder they have no love for their parents ... look at how parents treat them.'

Well, at least so far in India, we continue to mollycoddle our children and encourage them to stay in the family home, till such time as they're ready to marry and set up their own. Even that act (leaving home at twenty-five-plus) was considered revolutionary till as late as the '70s, when the 'joint family' finally began to disintegrate, owing to a combination of reasons, mainly economic. We should have anticipated what the fall-out would mean for us. But, of course, we didn't, and were soon praising the strength of the 'nuclear family', and declaring how it had liberated so many young people from having to compromise their goals for the sake of the elders. Young brides were jubilant at the thought of not having to share their husbands with possessive mothers-in-law. And the husbands were relieved they no longer had to hide their vodka/whisky/rum in colas, or sneak meat dishes into the privacy of their bedrooms/bathrooms, so as not to offend the more conservative members of the family.

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One wonders how middle-aged India will cope with this first-generation attitudinal shift. And, come to think of it, what happens when this lot hits sixty and seventy? Will they go back on their stated position and demand

involvement from their bewildered kids?

54 Widely-circulated magazines monitoring social change insist a rethink is underway. Smart young Indians have realized their folly and want to set the clock back. Extended families are back in vogue, while more and more youngsters are opting for the twenty-first century version of the Indian Arranged Marriage. It's perhaps a bit too early to predict whether this trend will snowball into something more permanent. I personally believe it will, since such a move will help careerists of both sexes, who can then pursue their dreams *and* have kids, in the safe knowledge they'll be well looked after by willing grandmothers. A practical arrangement that works for everyone—even the mothers-in-law (MILs), whose profile has undergone such a dramatic change. Today, the hated *saas* is educated, informed, fit and aware. She, too, knows she can't afford to offend anyone, least of all, her *bahu*, who frequently earns as much as the *beta*, if not more. Contributing to the family kitty and enhancing the lifestyle quotient commands respect for the new young woman—and she certainly knows exactly how to take advantage of her freshly-minted status.

Does she have to endure endless lectures on 'tradition' because she wears jeans, drinks wine, flirts with men other than her husband, uses the f-word, travels abroad on her own, gets trashed occasionally and shows off her cleavage? But of course, traditions have to be jealously guarded, preferably by women. Men only have to pretend by wearing Rohit Bal *sherwanis*, not Raymond's suitings, at their weddings. Tradition is an exceedingly loaded term that

weighs everybody down, even those who try so hard to keep it alive. How does anybody prop up ideas going back 5,000 years? How can anyone be convinced about rituals that may have been valid way back then but are meaningless in today's context? Who has the time or interest to delve into the 'whys' and 'why nots' of institutionalized habits that are no longer central to the way we see ourselves?

Very often, I am caught between personal convictions and expected acts. I feel pretty confused when asked to choose between the two. I also feel guilty, like I'm copping out or denying something precious to my own children. Am I a lousy mother because I'm not entirely in sync with our great traditions? Should I be observing *Kadwa Chauth*, because the mothers of my daughter's friends go all out to starve in style with their gal pals? For the non-initiates, *Kadwa Chauth* is an annual fast undertaken by married women in north India for the welfare and long life of their husbands. For some unexplained reason, the ladies are expected to dress up in their bridal finery, complete with heavy jewellery, and *mehendi* adorning their palms. The fast is broken only after moonrise. The husband's arrival is greeted with much fanfare, as he is welcomed with an *aarti*, and his puffed-up-with-pride face is viewed through a sieve. (*Why?!*) What the origin of the festival is remains a mystery—perhaps it was a way to greet the weary warrior returning after hard-fought battles—but today, it has assumed ridiculous proportions, with rich, bored ladies making a full-blown 'event' out of it. Blame it on Bollywood, and next on Ekta Kapoor's soppy saas-bahu serials, if you

must. But Kadwa Chauth makes wives feel virtuous and worshipful towards the very men they otherwise treat like dirt and, perhaps, cheat on, during the remaining 364 days of the year.

Not being a ritualistic person, I am uncomfortable 'pretending' to feel pious when all I want to do is laugh! But, for young brides smoking in a dark, trendy lounge bar, as their hip husbands fix a round of dry martinis, I suppose observing Kadwa Chauth makes them feel more rooted. They tell themselves they are better wives, who believe in tradition, while their husbands proudly announce to envious colleagues, 'Man, gotta rush home early—let's skip squash at the club this evening—Tina/Alisha/Ayesha/Natasha has been fasting for me all day ... Kadwa-Chauth, you know.' How sweet. How foolish.

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## The great Indian wedding

This has undergone a dramatic transformation over the past ten years. It is no longer controlled by over-enthusiastic *chaachas* and *chaachees*. Event managers are booked well in advance for multiple functions that extend over ten days and several cities. This is not restricted to just the elite, creamy segment of Indian society. After all, not everyone is steel tycoon Laxmi Mittal, who took the cake by booking the Versailles Palace grounds for his darling daughter's wedding. Nor is everybody an ambitious, bratty, New York hotelier like Vikram Chatwal, who televised all the grand

ceremonies of his high-profile wedding. One doesn't mention Liz Hurley's opulent celebration—she is a show-biz phenomenon, whose marriage is an international circus with lots of money riding on various publicity rights. But even the average Joshi and Johar today budget disproportional amounts for wedding celebrations.

Recently, the worthy Budhmashi, who has been working in our home for the past fifteen years as a part-time staffer ('sweeper' sounds so politically incorrect!) had a blast of his own. When he decided to marry off two daughters in one go (double whammy), the celebrations lasted for over a week in the neighbourhood slum where he lives in a shabby jhopdi, next to an open sewer. He borrowed heavily for the functions he'd organized, one of which involved feeding 700 people from the slum—a grand feast, put together by an enterprising caterer from the same slum.

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Apart from the lavish gifts he was expected to bestow on his sons-in-law (motorbikes, refrigerators, beds and kitchen utensils, besides suit lengths and sarees for their extended families), the man also had to keep up appearances within his own community in the slums. But what of the killer-debt, I asked him worriedly, Budhmashi being the sole earner with two more children to settle. He pointed skywards and said, '*Bhagwan* will take care of everything—this is my duty. Nobody would have married my girls otherwise. They would've fallen into bad company ... got pregnant, eloped with a drunk, committed suicide ... these days, anything can happen. I feel better now that

they're married off—they have become their husbands' problem. If something goes wrong with either, the headache is the husband's.' Oh really?

In under three months, Budhmashi was back, bleary-eyed and desperate. He needed to borrow some more money, since the grooms were demanding more and more of him. I asked him why. 'Because I fed so many people at the wedding, they think I have a lot of money ...'

It's a vicious circle at all levels. This man is caught in a never-ending cycle of arrears. He is illiterate, and of poor health. If he dies, his widow will be left penniless and with a huge debt hanging over her. The man has gone crazy, working eighteen hours a day, sweeping in one flat, washing cars for someone else, cleaning toilets for a third. With no sleep and poor nutrition, he isn't going to make it. I told him so flatly, pointing out that hospital bills would further burden him. But he can't stop what he started when he made that first down payment for a gleaming motorbike to dazzle his daughters' in-laws.

Upper middle-class India is suffering in a similar fashion. I walked into the plush elegance of India's first Louis Vuitton store in Delhi soon after it opened. I looked at the absurd price-tags and wondered who'd be crazy enough to put down that kind of money for monogrammed leather. A lot of people, apparently. The LV store in Delhi has become the number one destination for trousseau-shoppers. I was told wealthy farmers from Punjab walk in carrying plastic shopping bags filled with currency notes. They place them on the counter nonchalantly and ask for



the top-of-the line three-piece luggage set for a beloved *beti*'s wedding buys. At over seventeen lakh rupees, that's a lot of money, even for a wealthy farmer.

**But these new buyers don't blink.** 'Nothing but the best—we want her to be happy in her new home.' Apparently, the three-piece set is booked for the next few years with Louis Vuitton Moët Hennessy unable to keep up with the demand. 'No self-respecting bride leaves her maternal home without the set ... it is an essential part of her trousseau,' a smart salesman told me smugly. And that is a small part of the bigger picture, which includes serious jewellery, real estate, other long-term assets and financial instruments.

**As for the wedding itself—don't ask.** Parents are compelled to keep aside a sizeable portion of their life's earnings for their children's weddings—and with zero gratitude, in return.

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The latest trend is to skip hosting a lavish seven-day *tamasha* in India and opt for a 100-invitees-only, exclusive affair in distant Bali/Phuket/Pattaya. It's slightly more cost-effective, and can conveniently keep out the riff-raff. Maybe Budmashi would have saved his health, had he shifted his venue out of the slum and come up with an improvised Bali plan—Juhu Beach in Mumbai is a great alternative. I say this wryly and sadly. I see no hope for Budmashi—how on earth will he pay back creditors, those dodgy men who charge over 30 per cent interest and think nothing of adopting brutal muscle power to recover their debts?

One would've thought the extravaganzas we, in India,

call 'weddings' would have adapted themselves to a more modern, realistic, twenty-first-century format, with less waste and more restraint. But that's not happening. Several enterprising ladies have cottoned on to the potential by launching Bridal Festivals that rake in the big bucks. Media houses have also joined the Wedding Bazaar by holding parallel two-day events which showcase the latest fashions, the coolest trends in everything from one-of-a-kind jewellery to limited edition gifts. Every detail is taken care of, including invitation cards and thank-you notelets. The wedding business has grown into a multi-crore industry and is still ballooning. 'It's a great sign ... a healthy sign,' said a satisfied fashion-designer whose main revenue is generated during the bridal season. He talked about the trickle-down effect, which is evident when one drives past any pavement market in urban India. The colourful clothes one sees fluttering tantalizingly on hastily put-up plastic ropes lining busy avenues invariably feature cheap versions of the latest designer ensembles. Stroll into any shanty town and you'll see young people clad in polyester designs borrowed from popular Hindi movies in which the heroines have been dressed by famous designers. Manish Malhotra's pastel chiffon sarees or Aki Narula's *Bunty Aur Babli* shirt-salwars have made it to Lahore, London and Las Vegas, apart from swamping the local *mandis* of Patna, Putney or Peshawar. Seen from this perspective, the great Indian wedding has enhanced our economy and contributed to its growth. But on a more mundane level, it has become a social disease, with families unable to cope

with growing expectations from everybody, to impress and outdo the neighbours.

**Wedding and funerals are two sides of the same coin.** Both involve ridiculous displays, either of fake rituals or wealth. I thought of linking Budhmashi's story with our driver Choudhary's. He comes from Bihar and is extraordinarily proud of his caste, which he proclaims to the world by wearing a prominent red *tika* on his forehead. 'I am a Choudhary ...' he declares, and everybody is expected to know the implication. His children are still too young for him to worry about their marriages. But his ailing father died recently. Choudhary looked suitably crestfallen when he broke the news, but I suspect he was thinking of the impending expenses ahead, and not the loss of a father. After he pretended to wipe away a few tears and I made soothing sounds of comfort (the Indian tch-tch-tch sound that's created by pressing the tip of the tongue against the back of the front teeth), we got down to business. 'How much?' I asked, striving to sound stern and businesslike. He looked away into the far distance, made a few calculations and said, 'Fifty thousand ... at least ...' I gulped. 'Five months,' he assured me, 'and I'll give back the money ...' I'd heard that before. 'But ... why fifty thousand?' Choudhary is technically illiterate and has never been to school. But he understands numbers, money, fractions, loan repayment schedules ... and all the important stuff. He shuffled his feet and started a long story he knew I wouldn't have the patience to listen to ... 'I'll have to pay for the wood for his funeral pyre, the five

priests who'll perform the final prayers and conduct the rituals, then there'll be thirteen days of mourning during which I'll have to feed all the mourners ... once that's done, I'll take the ashes to the Ganga to immerse them, followed by more pujas. One has to do this ... it's a part of our *rivaaz* ...' I knew it was crazy to argue or talk him out of it, so I tried negotiating instead. 'Not fifty ... I can spare thirty ...' He shook his head, 'Forty ...' I shook mine ... 'thirty-five ...' He nodded. The deal was done. I kicked myself. Damn. He'd agreed a bit too swiftly. Had I pushed it, he would've settled for twenty-five. I always knew I was a lousy bargainer.

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I thought about Choudhary's father's elaborate thirteen-day funeral and the feeding of relatives. And my mind went back to my last goodbye to my own father. The end came after a ten-day battle in hospital. He was close to a 100 years when he died, a strong and inspiring lion of a man. He had countless friends and admirers, besides all of us, his children and grandchildren. But we believed he would have preferred to keep his last rites private and without any religious ceremony. Within a couple of hours of his passing away, the hearse took him to the electric crematorium close to the hospital he'd spent the past agonizing days in. There were no ceremony, no priests, no chanting of mantras, no garlands and, mainly, no extended relatives and visitors—just his children, son-in-law, daughter-in-law and five grandchildren. It was all over within two hours. Then came the question of how to dispose of the ashes. We watched as workers from the crematorium

efficiently (and with characteristic indifference) gathered up the remains of a man who'd been such a powerful force in our lives—a towering figure, who'd once been a 'briefless lawyer' with no less a person than Baba Saheb Ambedkar, as both took the local train to the small causes court in south Mumbai, and waited for clients! •

Baba Saheb Ambedkar went on to become one of the architects of our Constitution and an inspiring *neta*, especially for the Dalits, who worship him. While my father moved to Delhi after serving as a district judge in rural Maharashtra. From an additional secretary in the ministry of law to a senior legal counsel at the Atomic Energy Commission, working directly with Homi Bhabha, his career was remarkable and inspiring.

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Suddenly, there he was, reduced to an aluminium bucket of still smouldering ashes, which were cooled down by pouring cold water on them (to save time!), before pouring the strange mixture through a large sieve. I watched, fascinated, as the workers poked around, sorting the bones—large ones to this side, the vertebrae to another. **'How many *matkas*?' they asked. 'One will do,' we replied.**

The question was relevant. Most people prefer to collect the ashes in multiple pots, so that they can immerse them in the holy rivers of India—preferably the Ganga in Varanasi, or the *sangam* of two rivers (mythically three) at Allahabad. There are also the truly devout who'd go to the Gangotri or to Hrishikesh close to the Himalayas. But we knew (or thought we did!) that our father would've mocked

such an exercise and deemed it a 'waste of time' ... even though he was born into a Saraswat Brahmin family that till today observes all the *samskaras* as stipulated in the scriptures. So ... what were we to do with our single matka of still red-hot ash? Immerse it in the sea, close to the spot near our home, where he used to take his evening stroll?

64 It was around that time that his tall, ramrod-straight, familiar figure could be spotted, amongst iPod-wearing teenagers sporting Juicy Couture, and other residents from the area who frequently sought him out for his wit and wisdom. As the sun sank into the Arabian Sea, we said a silent prayer, floated a few flowers in the gently lapping waves and poured the ashes into the water. To me, it was a perfect goodbye—but traditionalists would disagree. It had been virtually the same drill when we lost our mother. If relatives found it unorthodox and inappropriate, they didn't voice it to any of us. Which is just as well ... but it also underlines the impersonal, carefully calibrated communication systems that now define relationships in a society that once nurtured verbalizing anything and everything, within the family structure. All that was achieved keeping the pecking order in mind. Nobody dared to cross those invisible lines or break the rules.

I had lost both my grandfathers before my birth. But my father's eldest brother was given the same status and perceived as the head of the family. I don't recall a single conversation I may have had with him as a child—it was unthinkable to approach a family elder without reason or formal permission. And yet, his word was law. Very little

was done without his sanction. The question of disregarding his diktats did not arise. My strong-willed father would behave like a nervous schoolboy in the presence of his brother, unnerving us all by his 360° switcheroo! We didn't know this docile man!

But we knew what that reverence towards 'Anna' and 'Tatya' (his brothers), denoted. Whatever reservations my mother harboured about these relationships were never discussed. There was a tacit understanding between my parents that excluded dissent when it came to respecting the strict hierarchies that were scrupulously adhered to, within extended families.

My own children, never having been exposed to such rigid structuring, take most relationships in their stride. But when it comes to formal/ceremonial occasions, there's no question of taking liberties of any kind. Kakas, Kakees, Mamas, Mamees, have to be given their due in the prescribed manner. But

since weddings and funerals requiring such a show of rank and discipline are getting rarer and rarer, everybody's fine with the new, casual equation between generations.

Today, it's a far more democratic set-up with kids

having a say in even key decisions like buying a car, moving home, planning holidays. Everybody has an equal voice in

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order

the nuclear family, which can be disorienting to elders who have still to accept the new order of kids and parents being on casual, buddy-buddy terms, exchanging high fives, swilling beer, cracking risqué jokes, sharing clothes ... but there it is. With a nuclear family's intense bonding, cousins, aunts and uncles have become totally marginalized. Nobody has the time to nurture these extended relationships or 'stay in touch'. I'm ashamed to confess it has been years since I saw some of my cousins who stay in the same city. Chances are we won't recognize one another on the street. With such a complete emotional and physical disconnect there is no family road map left to consult. I have no idea how Saraswat Brahmins conduct marriages and funerals. There's no one who can guide me, except my mother's sister, who's frail and housebound. I haven't visited her in years. But at least we speak to each other on my birthday, when she calls bright and early to wish me.

My own children do not follow any specific religious practices. They are entirely unaware of which 'caste' they belong to on either side. They know they are born to Hindu parents, but I'm not sure this makes any difference to their existence. They eat all flesh, follow all festivals and interact with all faiths equally. Whether this is good or bad, I can't really say. Will it lead to a sense of rootlessness twenty years down the line? Will they look back on their upbringing and wonder why we didn't focus more on religious instruction? Will they fault our methods, disapprove? I dread the verdict! I shuddered at the prospect. **But as a parent I accept I'll be judged harshly—it**



**is the fate that goes with the job!** What does concern me are my own ambivalent feelings towards 'traditional' celebrations. If and when the children do get married, how on earth will I fulfil my obligations? I loathe the idea of six- or even four-day 'events'. I would prefer them to exchange their vows in the privacy of our home, with only the few who matter in their lives being present to witness their joy. I would restrict the guest list and focus on keeping things quick and simple. But will I be given the choice?

Extravagant weddings are such a colossal waste—why not give the young couple a better start to their lives by giving them money instead of an elaborate mehendi-sangeet-reception with a cast of thousands of strangers? Big weddings are a nightmare—people come, people eat and drink, people leave, people criticize and people forget. All that effort, planning, anxiety, insecurity, spread over months, goes straight down the tube. A few years later, something goes 'phut' and the marriage is called off. But does that matter any more?

Last week I received an elaborate, gold-edged invitation to a beautiful young woman's third wedding! I was both astonished and delighted ... why not? Here's a gal who refuses to give up, like Liz Taylor. She obviously loves getting married and wants each wedding to be extra-special, with all possible trimmings in place. **This is the new India—nobody blinks when the bride says, 'I do' for the third time,** surrounded by the very people who've attended her previous *shaadis*. She invites former husbands

and countless exes who show up sportingly to wish the newly-weds. This is not a Bollywood script. It is happening ... and if some sour-puss aunt does not approve ... well, she needn't join the party!

## Desis are dirty

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It all started with Shilpa Shetty and *Big Brother*—the reality show in Britain that brought several sensitive issues out into the open. Tormented and taunted on the show by other participants, Ms Shetty was accused by them of being a 'dirty Indian ...' This was after a particularly disastrous attempt by Shilpa at impressing her housemates with chicken curry cooked by her, and eaten, desi-style, using her fingers instead of cutlery. Did that make Shilpa 'dirty'? One of the barbs flung at her after she picked onions out of the gravy was 'God knows where those hands have been ...' There were other references to 'odd' Indian habits by the inmates of the *Big Brother* house.

Soon after this controversy had blown into a ridiculous racist war, I found myself at a very posh Steak House in Dubai, enjoying a late-night dinner with two polished gentlemen, one of whom was thirty-something and very 'cool'. He was the New Indian with Attitude (it comes with money and success on foreign shores). He'd ordered ribs with rice on the side. The steak knives we were given (you know these lethal-looking ones with serrated edges?) were doing their job efficiently enough with the filet

mignon. But the Cool Dude would have none of this. He attacked his ribs 'n' rice with his fingers (most Neanderthal, I thought admiringly), consuming the mess in exactly the same way most Indians slurp down a *thali* heaped with mounds of rice drowning in *sambar*. The other, older gentleman stated his disapproval while looking around embarrassedly to see whether other diners (mostly Whites) had noticed. The Cool Dude continued to wallop down his ribs 'n' rice with gusto, stopping briefly between mouthfuls to say, 'Chill out ... I'm paying for the meal ... I can eat it any which way I want to ... oh, by the way, do we correct foreigners who tackle *chappatis* with a knife and fork? I find that equally absurd.' Hmmm. Good perspective. Is this what they mean by India Poised?

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Newcomers to India are often startled by the prolonged guttural throat-clearing that follows every intake of food or drink. We think nothing of excusing ourselves from the table and heading straight for the nearest washbasin. If we could, we'd carry our stainless steel tongue cleaners with us, wherever we go, such is the dependence on keeping our palate free of any residue.

The first time foreigners witness, or rather hear, this gargling operation, they jump nearly out of their skins. 'Is the person gagging? Something wrong?' 'Yes, I mean, no—the person is okay—just clearing his throat,' we offer helpfully. The sounds are pretty alarming—like a gut-spilling exercise after an extended choking bout. That we indulge in this disgusting-to-others practice without the least self-consciousness is another example of our, 'I am

so-o-o-o clean ... I nearly vomit out my meal minutes after consuming it.' Well—others subjected to the sound effects produced nearly upchuck theirs! But do we care?

70 'Dirty Indians' on one level, seems ironical, given our age-old mantra, 'Cleanliness is next to Godliness.' Most Indians would like to believe that's exactly how they lead their lives. Most homes will be reasonably neat and tidy, some homes obsessively so. But behind the *chakmak* lies another story—what you don't want in your own home is nonchalantly flung out of the window into the neighbour's compound. As long as your personal space remains pristine and you can look around with a satisfied, smug grin at a 'clean' kitchen, who cares that the rotting garbage has been selfishly deposited in someone else's space? Living in a high-rise myself, I'm appalled at the used sanitary napkins, stained underwear, empty cans and even bits of broken furniture that are frequently found in the driveway of what is considered one of India's most expensive pieces of real estate. Who *are* these people who think nothing of chucking their dirt out of an open window? Why—my worthy neighbours, of course. So-called educated, urban Indian elite, with the latest BMW parked downstairs.

The idea of using garbage bins is a comparatively new one to Indians. Public parks (the few we have) do feature bins, but most get stolen (what use would anybody have for such a container? You'd be surprised!) or are simply ignored. People discard wrappers, cola cans, condoms, plastic water bottles, leftovers—oh, just about anything they no longer need—anywhere and everywhere. Our

beaches are strewn with plastic—aggressive bans or awareness campaigns have done little to remedy the situation. ‘Have garbage, will throw’, seems to be the mantra as even posh people in Merc SLs roll down tinted windows to spit out a stream of betel juice. Our railway stations are perhaps the dirtiest in the world. They stink, they assault the senses and one can hardly take a step without putting one’s foot into something disgusting—this includes the shit of children encouraged to empty their bowels on tiny pieces of paper placed on the platform. Uncleared garbage overflows from dumps all over the city, even though municipal workers try and deal with mounds rotting for days, even months. The hovels and slums with open sewers make one wonder whether the so-called ‘quality of life’ can sink any lower. Sub-human conditions appal the unwary, with rabbit-sized rats scurrying around mountains of putrefying muck. Add the unrelenting lashing of Mumbai’s monsoon rains, and you can figure out for yourself just how fragrant India’s premier city really is, behind the veneer of spit and polish.

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**Personal vs public hygiene**, reflects the average Indian’s essential selfishness. It is said we are too individualistic as a people, that we think of ourselves before we think of us as a nation. Nowhere is this self-centredness more evident than in our response to garbage. So long as the dirt isn’t at our own doorstep, we really don’t give a damn ... or, er ... shit!

The story is pretty different in India’s villages, where over 70 per cent of the population live. Many years ago, I

was in a village called Bani in Saurashtra, and was mesmerized by its beauty. Apart from the embroidery and other crafts skills which have found world markets, it was the cleanliness of the entire community that impressed me. The mud-covered circular hut interiors, lined with gleaming brass utensils, were far more attractive 'spaces' than any of the elaborate 'Italian' kitchens with parquet flooring that have captured the imagination of middle-class Indians. Nearly every new ad for a residential complex features those pseudo-Italian kitchens with granite-topped island-stations and fancy chimneys to take care of stale curry smells. The Bani story repeated itself several times over, across India. But with a significant difference—rural abodes in Maharashtra may have been equally neat and clean, but the village dwelling was rarely minus overflowing gutters and outhouses that consisted of four bamboos covered with old rags or torn sarees located just a few metres away from the huts. The village well and its environs were rarely cleaned, with moss growing along the inside of the walls and muddy patches where the water pots were lined up. Personal hygiene was another matter, even in Bani, where the scarce water situation in the harsh desert meant wearing the same set of clothes day in and day out till they were threadbare. Baths were an equal rarity, leaving the clinging, rancid smell of sweat and stored butter hanging in the air.

Is it just our food habits that offend the West? I knew, while visiting friends in New York, that the snooty doorman, taking one look at my saree, would smirk before saying,

‘Oh ... Indian ... just follow the curry-smell to the 15th floor ...’ He was not wrong. I don’t know what it is about our spices, or whether the real culprit is the insulation in cold countries, but one can actually smell out a desi family, thanks to the masala trail. ‘Follow your nose,’ I was told in Germany, when I asked for an Indian restaurant. So, how come we don’t feel as overwhelmed by our masalas back home in India? Same spices, same cooking. Our apartment block doesn’t smell of biryani or sambar. Even our homes don’t exude strong odours, unless the drapes are made of velvet and there are no windows in sight.

But these are poor alibis and excuses. The sad truth of the matter is that Indians *are* dirty. **But Indian dirt is different from *phirangi* dirt. It is a cultural thing—**we find the fact that most Europeans don’t brush their teeth really disgusting. We are also convinced they rarely bathe, especially in winter. We insist they smell, which is why they have such an aggressive perfumes and deodorants industry. But despite their best efforts to camouflage their B.O., our sensitive noses manage to detect the revolting combo of cigarettes, beer, beef and strong coffee. We also stare disapprovingly at the lank, limp, stringy blond hair of Westerners and wonder whether they ever shampoo it thoroughly, or is it just sprayed into place every day? Oh—and of course, we know they prefer toilet paper to water, and that fact alone is enough to make Indians cover their open mouths with horror. Westerners watch the row of silent squatters along a highway doing their ‘jobs’ in full public view and cover their eyes! Often, I’m asked, ‘Where

are all these people going, carrying cans of water?’ I can’t get myself to say bluntly and crudely. ‘To shit ...’ So I answer. ‘To bathe their cows ...’

It’s too depressing to explain that for millions of Indians, there are no lavatories—just holes they dig in the soil, or a favourite kerbside spot. Right across from where I live, I see a familiar sight every morning, as residents of the slum close by walk in a single file across a long, narrow path built into the bay. They space themselves very carefully (five feet between each defecating individual), and chat companionably as they perform their morning ablutions. No self-consciousness, no shame. Men only.

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I have never ever spotted a woman in all these years. So ... when and where do women ‘go’? In the dead of the night behind the mangroves, an informer tells me. But what if a woman has the urge to ‘go’ some other time? ‘It is not an option, she has to suppress the urge,’ is the prompt reply. Children of both sexes use the footpath all through the day. Little girls sit together, singing songs, with the little boys at a short distance. The girls hold up their frocks, the boys wear just tattered T-shirts. At some stage in the little girls’ lives, they stop peeing or crapping in public. My guess is that happens once they begin to menstruate. The boys join the men, at the onset of puberty.

There is no place for pedestrians to walk on, given the piles of excreta lying in rows. Seeing this sad situation, a neighbour who’d came back after twenty years in America thought of an ingenious plan. He positioned his domestic help at strategic points along the seafront right in front of



our complex. His staff were given bundles of two-rupee notes and instructed to hand them out to potential crappers as an incentive to go do their thing further down the road. It must've worked, for I could no longer catch the morning crowd, determinedly adding fertilizer to the small patch of garden near the shore. The air is slightly cleaner now, but also because some social organization has constructed a *sauchalaya* close by. These public conveniences charge a small fee, but for the slum-dwellers it's still unaffordable—imagine six members of a family shelling out ten rupees per day for the use of a toilet. That's a lot of money for a family getting by on perhaps one thousand rupees a month. Combine that stench with the sharp foul smell of rotting fish, and even this helpful system comes crashing down.

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As I drove home from a meeting one day, I watched a large group of foreign tourists taking video clips of a group of naked urchins bathing in a temporary water tank on Marine Drive. The children were entirely oblivious to their stares as they splashed around happily in the filthy water—the same that had been used to wash a pile of clothes earlier. I thought to myself, 'At least these kids are bathing ... **when was the last time these camera-toting guys had any contact with water and soap?**' Yes ... one does become defensive. Toilet paper? Ha! Imagine wandering around with a dirty, smelly bum all your life. Yuck. Any Indian doctor will tell you how unhygienic it is to not wash thoroughly

after emptying one's bowels. How infections thrive and travel when the toilet paper treatment is inadequately performed. So, how dare those paperwallahs laugh at us? We may not use forks and knives to eat our food—but even a villager keeps his teeth clean with a rustic 'toothbrush' made of neem twigs—neem, the natural antiseptic that we, superior Indians, have been using for centuries, much before Dettol and antibiotics arrived on the scene.

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And yet, walk into any *kiraana* store today, and the array of personal hygiene products will stagger you. Not so long ago, India's range of hair care, skin care, body pampering and related 'eesentials' would've barely filled a shelf. Today, there are any number of brands vying for consumer attention. You can get them all—from creams that take care of crow's feet and cost an arm and a leg, to hair gels smelling delightfully of favourite fruits that address styling issues for men and women. Personal grooming for both sexes is a number one priority, and it is not uncommon to see more and more men undergoing facials/manicures/pedicures/bleaching/waxing/eyebrow-threading in unisex salons across the country. If anything, men's beauty products form the fastest growing segment in the same space. And not surprisingly, make-up artists are being booked well in advance by bridegrooms who want to out-glow their brides.

'Outer beauty' is certainly competing with the so-called 'inner beauty' that pageant queens make a mandatory reference to before winning their tinsel crowns. Going by the aggressive promos of deodorants, I imagine Indians are

becoming increasingly aware of the B.O. problem in the tropics. But paradoxically enough, the same people who douse their armpits with overpowering deo-sprays, continue to wear polyester clothing, synthetic bras and nylon underwear. God help you if you're trapped in a slow elevator going to the top floor of a high-rise. The odours are enough to gag you. Ditto for sliding into the backseat of a limo with the smartly-attired chauffeur sweating buckets under his dark polyester suit. So ... yes, we've started placing bathroom fresheners in the loo, pot-pourri satches in our cupboards and dried lavender petals next to our beds. These have replaced natural ventilation and camphor, evening *dhoop* and neem branches, which in the old days would keep mosquitoes, ants, cockroaches and bad smells away.

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Homes back then were certainly far more eco-friendly, with cross-ventilation, mud or cow-dung-washed floors, large doorways and high ceilings. But not one of our award-winning architects and Page 3 interior designers bother to address our actual housing requirements when they design their Legolands and win prizes for thrusting uncomfortable living concepts on bewildered people who'd rather keep their options open. The bigger pity is that in our rush to live a 'modern' life, we've shut ourselves off in hermetically-sealed boxes. Most ads for new, ghastly apartment blocks boast of several amenities that seem a bit crazy and out-of-context. Jacuzzis, shower stalls with the latest shower-heads? When, in reality even the poshest Indians prefer 'bucket baths', pouring their own mix of hot-and-cold

water over their bodies using *lotas* (silver for the rich, steel for the poor). These make for the most satisfying baths. If an Indian wants a shower, he waits for rain!

Hi-speed elevators, touch buttons for everything, curtains operated by a feather-light switchboard, central air-conditioning, piped music—it sounds far better than it actually is, when you start living in these still, fetid air boxes, telling yourself ‘Wow! I could be in Manhattan ...’

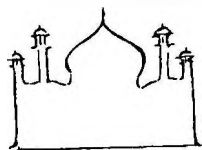
The only useful change that has directly impacted urban living is the frenzied construction of flyovers and underpasses. We are fifty years too late in this enterprise, but we’ll get there eventually. As for the ‘tube’ or subway system—well, Kolkatans and Delhi-ites swear by their pride-and-joy—the underground transit systems. Mumbai is still five years away from experiencing that particular delight. But, then, we have our trains (above ground)—on which women get raped, stoned, molested, robbed from time to time. And compartments get burnt or bombed. But we love our trains, almost as much as we love our BEST buses, and yellow-blacks. Mumbai is on an erratic and insane growth curve. Our Municipal ‘Fathers’ (more like ‘Thugs’) have perhaps failed to notice the savagery of a typical Mumbai monsoon. Year after year, our dirty metropolis gets dirtier, with devastating flooding of key arteries, building collapses, choked gutters, overflowing sewers and outbreaks of waterborne diseases. Everybody screams blue murder. Nothing happens. Meanwhile, our CM begs a visiting Chinese prime minister to help convert Mumbai into another Shanghai! Extraordinary? You bet.

But such is the level of our shamelessness.

I don't know when this Shanghai nonsense started or even who the culprit is. But the joke is that Mumbai needs a good, hard scrub more than a 'Shanghai tan'. It's no use pointing out to our beloved leaders that Mumbai can never ever make the Shanghai cut, mainly because Mumbai is still part of a democracy. As a young Indian businessman commented in a press interview recently, 'I wanted to put up a factory in Shanghai. I was shown a plot which was crammed with buildings. "This is the place for your factory," a Chinese official told me. "But it has so many buildings on it—where will my factory come up?" I asked. The official smirked, "Don't worry about those buildings. Once you decide, and sign the contract, we'll pull them all down and give you the plot for the factory.'" This won't—can't—happen in India. Try telling that to our chief minister.

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Meanwhile, the city continues to reel under one civic crisis after another. The last municipal elections fielded several candidates who'd never seen the inside of a school, and were vegetable vendors, black marketeers, racketeers, gangsters, ex-cons, fishmongers among other job descriptions. These are our city's 'mamas and papas'. What's the bet the smelliest, largest, most putrid garbage can in the whole world, which goes by the name of 'Mumbai', is going to get smellier and dirtier with each passing year? But, why worry? We have Bollywood!





Indians  
Sex Machines<sup>are</sup>





Oh please—let's just dump that *Kamasutra* fixation and be honest with ourselves. Indians copulate. So does the rest of the world. Period. Are we great, even good lovers? I seriously doubt that. Do we copulate more than our global counterparts? Possibly. But that's also because we have fewer diversions or, at any rate, that was the case till satellite TV 'happened' to us. Sex vs entertainment? That's a no-brainer. Indian are having their most torrid love affair ever—with their TV sets. Nothing is as big a turn-on for us as that flickering image, and of course, the throbbing organ in our hands—the remote control. We can't get enough from over 100-plus TV channels.

Regardless of what's on the small screen, we stay glued. We are hooked to the background sound of soap stars squabbling, TV commentators arguing and prime-time anchors pontificating. And of course, we wake up to film music, go to bed watching music videos and won't mind dying to the insistent beat of any popular Bollywood hit. Where the hell is the time for sex? If it's a toss-up between watching Bipasha Basu doing an item number about a *beedi* to a furtive coupling on an uncomfortable bed, with the risk of interruptions by curious neighbours, brawling kids and intrusive in-laws, a micro-second away from a satisfying

climax, hey—anyone with any sense would take Bipasha's beedi break any day! Indians have sex. Whether it qualifies as 'good sex' or 'bad sex' is hard to say, since we continue to be so squeamish about the subject. The surveys so far are hardly representative, with a pathetically modest database. Even so, each time a mass-circulated magazine announces the dramatic results of the latest sex survey, that issue is instantly sold out. We want to know whether other Indians are having more or less sex than we ourselves are—and that's about it.

What is apparent, however, is the radical shift in attitude, especially with the

twenty-somethings. I half suspect this is more for the benefit of market researchers than a reflection of reality. Giggly teenagers these days have taken to being uber 'cool' while

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discussing hitherto forbidden topics like virginity, oral sex, condom use. Are they really as casual and comfortable about experimenting with multiple partners in their lives as they claim? Hard to confirm, but they're certainly talking a lot on the subject. The biggest change has come from women, who've suddenly discovered they have a say in this regard. Traditionally, Indian women were nothing more than receptacles for sperm. They were told (if they were

told anything at all!) that men were 'like that only'. Men needed a 'release', or 'Men are men ... put up with it ... you'll get used to it ... it isn't all that bad ... do it, or he'll look for it somewhere else ... there are any number of women he could sleep with ... you do want children, don't you? Well, then ...?' Nearly every woman I've ever discussed it with says sex is an entirely overrated exercise.

But women also see it in the right perspective. Sex is *one* of the things in a woman's life, along with food, jewellery, nice sarees and goodness know what else. It is not something they see in isolation—a huge sign on Broadway, up in lights, a gigantic magnet that makes mush of better options—like a good book, music, SLEEP for God's sake! For men, it is often the end-all and be-all of their existence. At least at that precise moment when they 'want it'. And they always seem to want it—and want it bad!

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**And yet, the world has been fooled for centuries—if you ask me, we should keep up the joke, especially all that nonsense contained in the biggest literary con job out of India—Vatsayana's *Kamasutra*.** I remember a rather bizarre conversation I had with the future king of England (that is, if Jug Ears ever makes it to the throne). This was at his Highgrove residence, just a little after Camilla had been officially 'outed' but not yet accepted by the palace. It was one of those high-falutin Indian charities Charles is the patron of. I got the feeling he wouldn't have known what exactly he was supposed to be supporting that evening, nor cared less. He walked into the reception area with his standard quizzical expression

and did the rounds politely. Assorted Indians, grandly dressed for the royal *darshan*, attempted strange curtsseys and dips, clad in ornate sarees and all-too-tight *churidars*. I was introduced to him as a 'famous writer from India'. He looked vaguely interested as he asked (on auto pilot), 'So ... what do you write?' I answered, somewhat cheekily, 'Risqué novels ... bodice-rippers ...' The jug ears flapped (I swear they did), his eyebrows shot up, a wicked gleam lit up those tired eyes and he stopped long enough to engage in a proper conversation.

86      Soon, there was a stir as an unexpected guest decided to join the party. It was Camilla herself. This threw the organizers totally since the seating at the head table had to be redone. While the overdressed ladies rushed around, Camilla joined us and I decided to bring the *Kamasutra* into the conversation. It was a sly trick and far from subtle. But I gambled it would amuse the man who'd once expressed his deepest desire to be reborn as his lady-love's tampon! With intimacy levels that, errr ... deep and intense, the reference to the love treatise was perfect. Sure enough, the two of them exchanged meaningful looks as I suggested the absurdity of some *asanas*. 'People should attempt those at their own risk—one could break one's neck ... also, even the simplest positions are very hard on the knees.' Oh God! I'd obviously touched on something important! The two of them eye-locked and then burst into knowing, prolonged laughter. For me, it was an unforgettable 'royal moment'. I had visions of them romping around in a gigantic four-poster bed, Camilla wearing frilled knickers (or less),

and Charles in just woollen socks, trying out *Kamasutra* poses and pulling a few middle-aged muscles in the bargain. I wish I had been less honest about those recommended contortions and encouraged them to realize their full sexual potential by going the whole hog! Yet another way of the Empire striking back.

## Sex does not exist

Unlike the Brits, who discuss sexual matters with such wry humour in regular dinner-table conversation, Indians never allude to sex, even by mistake. In fact, we pretend sex does not exist. Or, if it does, it is for 'procreational purposes' only. Never recreational! Sex isn't considered 'fun'. Someone who's experimental in his/her approach is instantly branded 'bad' and dubbed 'weird'. We insist on a chaste, prudish approach to all matters that are considered sensual and do not encourage casual contact for fear it will trigger off base instincts. And yet, it isn't uncommon to see Indian men walking around un-self-consciously with their arms around each other's waists or shoulders, or their fingers interlocked. Outsiders often believe that sight is an example of how liberal and accepting Indians are about homosexual love! What it actually is, is a displacement or an expression of frustration. Human beings want to touch and be touched. I'm sure most of those men would rather be fondling/embracing females—but they can't ... they won't. Not even their wives!

As a child growing up in Delhi, I would be fascinated by the casual workers who lived in jhuggies next to a construction site near our sprawling government colony. I would be especially interested in trying to figure out how and when these dozens of babies were made, given that there was no space and zero privacy to make them in. At the time, I was ten years old and pretty precocious. I'd try and peek behind the tattered 'curtains' guarding the entrance of those improvised dwellings, while the workers took their afternoon siestas during the searing summers. I did manage to catch them 'at it', on two or three occasions, but was disappointed when all I could see were the hairy, bared buttocks of the man. The woman's anatomy was completely submerged under yards of *ghagra*. The act was over in under five minutes, and didn't look pleasurable at all.

The image has stayed with me, and it came back vividly recently, as my twenty-one-year-old daughter and I drove past a particularly shabby stretch of Mumbai lining the old docks. The homes were made out of corrugated aluminium sheets and discarded packing cases. The total area was no larger than 5 ft x 5 ft. Most of life was being lived on the filthy road outside these hovels. And there, beside the rickety *charpoys*, one could see entire families carrying on with their routines—kids bathing in gutter water, women cooking on wood fires in dented aluminium vessels, men in torn *lungis*, smoking beedies and staring listlessly around them. Right next to this scene of urban decay were garishly painted sex-workers, also operating from the very same

boxes, made out of crates and sheets. A lot of them were clearly men in drag, wearing mermaid skirts and brief *cholis*, stuffed with cotton wool. They sat on the edge of the pavement with their skirts pulled up to their knees, legs parted, cigarettes dangling from their wide-boned wrists. Their clientele were inter-state truck drivers, who'd stop briefly, duck into the box and emerge minutes later, after, perhaps, a hasty but efficient blow job. I looked at Arundhati to see her expression. It was sad and pained. She'd averted her eyes and switched off. Later, she asked me how and where those charpoy couples made love ... and made all those babies. I didn't want to tell her, 'exactly in the same time the sex-worker satisfied the trucker'. It was such an ugly truth to reveal to one so young.

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The same night, driving back from an event, we passed Mumbai's notorious pavement residents—rows upon rows of men and women who occupy designated spots along the pavement and sleep soundly through everything. Here, they don't even have packing-case hovel, to protect their privacy. And yet, they manage to have sex and produce children. When? How? *Why?*

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**There is a general belief that India is in the throes of a sexual revolution. And that young Indians are experimenting like never before. I wonder how much of that is really true. One thing, however, that cannot be disputed is that women have finally discovered**

autonomy over their own bodies. Especially young urban women, who seem to be very active sexually.” Far more so than my generation, and far more openly so than the in-between generation. Talking to liberal, articulate girls into their second decades, it’s easy to believe that they are totally relaxed about their sexuality. But are they really? Or is it just a Delhi/Mumbai niche phenomenon that one uses to make a bigger statement about the country’s attitude?

90 When I was at college in Mumbai (St Xavier’s) in the ’70s, it was the West that was in the throes of a sexual revolution. We were foolish enough back then to mimic our daring counterparts in Europe, England and America, by staging flower-power ‘Love Fests’, but when it came to pushing the sexual envelope, not many people were that bold. Or else, we wouldn’t have raised our eyebrows at the ‘shocking’ behaviour of a Parveen Babi or a Protima Bedi (the voluptuous Odissi dancer and ‘official’ flower-child who staged a ‘streaking’ photo op) when they boasted openly about their bohemian/hippie lifestyles and exhibited their latest lovers without the slightest self-consciousness. Multiple partners? Oh ... only bad girls had those. And they ended up badly, too. Good girls ‘fooled around’, but just a little. They bagged ‘good’ husbands who valued their chastity, and lived happily ever after.

How much have things really changed? Even a casual viewing of popular soap operas reveals the desired attributes of ‘traditional’ Indian women. Matrimonial ads continue to specify the virginal requirements of brides. And even an iconic movie star like Amitabh Bachchan is not embarrassed



to state he approves of actress Aishwarya Rai (his daughter-in-law) because she is 'homely and domesticated' (read: not a sexual adventuress). While young Indian men have relaxed the double standards a little, when it comes to choosing a partner they still reserve their respect for the 'well-brought-up' girl (read: conservative and untouched). Words like 'slut', 'whore', 'pimpette', 'bitch' continue to be hurled at any woman who society believes sleeps around or indulges in sexual escapades. Men? Oh, they have an entirely separate set of rules. '*Mard toh mard hai*,' everybody agrees.

And yet, with the ghastly, gruesome Nithari murders of 2007, involving a public school-educated businessman, his psychotic servant and their victims (sexually abused, brutally murdered children), **India is reluctantly waking up to a certain sickness, its hypocrisies, its submerged violence.** The discovery of discarded skulls and bones of defenceless kids, lured into this House of Maniacs, has forced Indians to confront horrible realities.

. The question that arises is: were we always like this? Or is this something new—a ghastly imported virus that is infecting our society? We'd like to believe this kind of aberrant behaviour is not inherent to us, because we are so peace-loving and puritanical. An absurd assumption, given the convoluted stories evident in our mythology and folk tales. The thing is, Indians deep down believe sex is 'dirty'. It is referred to as '*gandi baat*'. Nobody wants to discuss the subject in an open, natural way. There is far too much guilt involved. And too much revulsion, too. Bodily fluids are

considered distasteful—which could explain why kissing itself is thought of by many as being ‘un-Indian’. Adults plant *chummas* on children. And there it ends. No wonder kissing on screen is still seen as a big issue, worthy of extensive media attention. Small-time actor Emran Hashmi’s sole claim to fame is his feat of filming a record number of kisses! No reference to Hashmi is complete without a nod to his kissing expertise. Not so long ago, a couple in Chennai caught kissing on camera at a popular night-club found themselves in a great deal of trouble after making national headlines for their ‘boldness’. It was after this silly exposé that the local authorities clamped down on couples cuddling in public places.

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We’re the best

But since India is at present in the ‘We’re the best’, ‘We’re the greatest’ mood, everyone is including the Great Indian Lover in the ‘Best’ of the world category. How absurd. Maybe, several centuries ago, perhaps during the Golden Ages of the Guptas, Mauryas and other exalted dynasties, people in the Indo-Gangetic plain were really and truly sexually evolved. Sculpture, frescoes, paintings, erotic poems ... everything that is pre-Mughal, pre-British, indicates a society that enjoyed life, enjoyed food, wine and love-making. But that was ages ago. The story is pretty depressing now, and don’t believe a word of what those insanely over-the-top women’s mags tell you. In fact, the

crazy thing about the so-called Sexual Revolution raging in the country (more inside our stupid heads!) is the total disconnect between everyday realities and what the tabloids suggest in their weekly 'Test Your Love Quotient' quizzes.

Yes, there are more lingerie stores in the malls than shoe boutiques, but I wonder which Indian woman goes to bed wearing a blood-red thong with dyed chicken feathers over her pubis? There are provocative ads with teaser lines ('going down was never better'), and cheesy male models in tight underwear with lipstick marks all over their chests, but all this seems ludicrous when compared to the daily urban grind that leaves no time for such nonsense. 'Making out in the bathroom is the new sex mantra,' a breathless teen mag tells its nubile readers. Oh yeah? How does anyone make out in those slippery, wet, unattractive hellholes that leak and smell? How many Indian bathrooms come with shower stalls and jacuzzis? Mainstream magazines feature semi-naked models romping around on luxe satin sheets, proclaiming their sexual charge via explicit advice ('Tongue-in-the-navel—ooh ... and behind the knees ... aaah'). What sort of person is having this kind of sex? Working women come home looking grim and/or fierce. It needs a really motivated/horny fellow to want to tackle this creature. Working men, after hours of commute time, get home with smelly armpits and a breath as foul as their mood. Foreplay? Sex? You must be kidding. *Dal-chawal*, hot *parathas*, a bit of *Nach Baliye* and a familiar bed to snore in, is closer to the truth. But we dare not admit it.

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All those phoney ads on TV, all those tantalizing articles

in various publications, all that big talk at soirees, actually add up to very little action. But we are dying to project a different version of ourselves. Right now, the mood is giddy. **A booming economy does not induce instant erections.** If anything, prosperity on that scale leads to dullness in bed. I noticed the expressions on the faces of very prosperous Swedes, when my husband and I spent two days in Stockholm. Those people looked glum and suicidal, and I couldn't imagine any of them having sex. Whereas, 70 per cent of India (the rural-ites!) have hardly any recreation. They toil in the fields and collapse on top of their poor wives. Condom use is alien to them. So, they breed. But at least one knows for sure that they are having sex, given the birth rate. City folks are not having sex. Well, not having enough sex. Or quality sex. But they spend a great deal of time, money and energy making themselves sexy. Makes no sense. But then, neither does sex.

\*

Did Meena Kumari have sex? Enjoy sex? For her sake I hope she did both. But that was the Bollywood era celebrating vestal virgins dressed in pristine white sarees, looking grief-stricken as they warbled love-lorn lyrics, generally about unrequited *pyaar*. These were India's favourite 'tragedy queens'. Nargis, Madhubala, Meena Kumari, Nutan. I hated them. And I didn't like their movies, either. *Mother India*? Bah! *Mughal-e-Azam*, *Sahib, Bibi aur Ghulam*, *Bandini*, *Mamta* (Suchitra Sen), *Dhool ke Phool* (Mala

Sinha). There they were, those luscious ladies, well-upholstered with enough foam padding to fill a sofa, big red *bindis* on pancaked foreheads, glycerine tears flowing down their rouged cheeks—come on, which man in his right senses would want to bed any of them? Maybe that was the whole idea. Film-makers were themselves paralyzed by an overwhelming attack of prudishness. They wanted their heroines to be *devis*, worshipped at the altar of martyrdom. Untouched, aloof, lofty, and ... boring. Nobody had sex in those movies. Physical attraction was hinted at with close-ups of flowers kissing, butterflies fluttering and bushes shaking. Even that was deemed lewd and excessive. Perhaps the scenario changed with Sharmila Tagore stripping down to a sexy bikini for a *Filmfare* cover, and then getting really up close and personal with Rajesh Khanna as he panted '*Roop tera mastana*', once the flames of passion were lit, and Tagore was bold enough to let herself be seen wearing just a sheet while her wet clothes dried!

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Lots of similar fires were kindled around the time in cinemas across India. Rehana Sultana's parted legs in B.R. Ishaara's breakthrough film *Chetna* were so prominently used on posters, they become emblematic of the sexualization of Hindi cinema. Then there was no looking back, as starlets stripped, gyrated, wiggled and giggled their way into countless male fantasies. Today, it's difficult for directors to get their heroines into anything more than the skimpiest of costumes. Nobody wants to play goody-goody 'devi' roles. She-devils, is more like it. Whether it's a Bipasha Basu or an Aishwarya Rai, the rules of the game

have dramatically altered—**it's sexy to be sexy in the movies**. And nobody brands these toned, golden, gorgeous goddesses as wanton harlots stripping their way to success. If Meena Kumari's exposed feet in *Pakeezah* got the masses excited and the hero (Raj Kumar) wrote a charming couplet on the lady's soles, Kareena Kapoor, Priyanka Chopra or Mallika Sherawat have no qualms about flaunting cleavage, baring legs and going all out to woo those hard-up front-benchers. With no official vamps on the scene, the heroines are filling in nicely, playing bad girls with complete aplomb. The disconnect is bizarre.

Often, I watch middle-aged, middle-class couples with kids coming to a swanky multiplex near my home. It's a big family outing—an expensive one—given the high ticket rates, popcorn and ice cream prices plus transport. I'd say, a family of four spends around Rs 1,200 for such an evening. What happens when they get home? Does the husband feel inspired by an 'item' number? Does he convey it to his wife? Do they discuss the effects of all that titillation ... get the children off their backs, go into the bedroom and make love? Highly unlikely. Maybe the man masturbates in the privacy of the loo, while the woman sublimates all such desires by stuffing her face with a syrupy *gulab jamun*. Sex is still seen as a clandestine activity, performed furtively in the dark and gotten over with as quickly as possible. Sex as a release. Sex as therapy. Rarely, sex as pleasure. Which may be one of the reasons why I am still asked annoying questions about the sexual content of my novels.

Take this typical example: I was invited to a panel

discussion on media trends at one of the most renowned management schools in the country. The discussion turned out to be pompous and dull, till the question-and-answer round was announced. My co-panellists were media heavyweights—editors, columnists, TV anchors. The men responded to eager questions from the students in typical fashion—throwing statistics and data to intimidate the goggle-eyed youngsters. Suddenly, one guy startled everybody by demanding a mike to ask me a specific question which, he clarified, had nothing to do with the stated objective of the panel discussion. ‘Are you working on a new book?’ he queried. I nodded non-committally since I hate discussing work in progress. **His eyes lit up. ‘Does it deal with the ... the ... sex thing?’ I wanted to laugh.** But by then, I noticed everybody’s eyes were on me. The pedantic professors were staring in a way I found most intrusive, and every man in the auditorium was suddenly alert and eager to hear the answer. Just the fact that a male student had had the ‘guts’ to articulate the three-letter word at such a forum was seen as being revolutionary. That he’d asked a *woman* such a question was considered bold and amazing. I didn’t like the man’s tone. Plus, I knew he hadn’t read any of my books. I sensed the question was meant to titillate and nothing else. It wasn’t prompted by academic interest, nor was there a sincere desire to get an answer. **I could have taken the guy apart in minutes, had I cared to, till I realized it was really collective repression speaking.**

All those men had possibly never ever spoken to a

woman—any woman—on this subject. I ended up feeling sorry for the bloke, and all those other stuffed shirts who were waiting expectantly for a ‘spicy’ response. That has become a pretty common experience for me—the ‘sex thing’ comes up frequently, and it’s invariably men who broach the subject with an expression on their faces that can only be described as ‘starved’. When they meet me for the first time, they seem disappointed encountering a fully-clad woman who doesn’t talk dirty. Some are naïve enough to babble. ‘But ... but ... we thought you’d be *bolder* ... you know ... like your novels.’ They are ambitious enough to expect me to flirt with them socially, since they believe all ‘bold’, ‘modern’ women are expert flirts!

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## Indian men are lechy

So say women across the board. An Englishwoman who recently relocated to Delhi as a fashion merchandiser and stylist was hopelessly disillusioned about Indian male chivalry within ten days. She called late one evening, close to tears. This wasn’t her first time in India. She’d been a frequent visitor in the old days, supervising fashion shoots and shows for foreign teams. Travelling in a pack, she discovered, was a far cry from being a solo player in the capital. The attitude of the very men who’d extended courtesy and respect in the past suddenly turned feral and scary. ‘I started getting looks ... calls ... suggestive text messages ... invitations of a peculiar nature ... I wondered,



what had changed? What had I done wrong?’

I told her just one thing—her status. She was a woman *alone*. ‘Does that make me an instant target?’ Alas, yes. It does, honey. The barsati she lived in became a favourite stop-over (‘Oh ... I was passing by ... I thought, let me stop and check whether you needed something ... anything ...’). These sorts of generous offers were always articulated with that annoying smirk that says unmistakably, ‘Bed me ...’ She was initially insulted and appalled. ‘Do I send out sexual vibes? How dare those men imagine I’m sitting around waiting for them to drop by?’ Soon, she toughened up and dropped the ‘propah’ British attitude she insisted she’d been raised to adhere to, no matter what. She hastily picked up a few desi mannerisms (colourful *gaalis*, too) and learned exactly how to say ‘Shove off ...’ in unambiguous terms. About the groping and feeling-up tricks in crowded places? Well, mace cans and other ‘Western’ devices were abandoned, in favour of a well-delivered kick in the groin. ‘They yelp ... I love it!’ she gloated, recounting a few incidents.

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I felt so ashamed hearing this. One would’ve thought things had changed from the time I was a schoolgirl. Being a sportsperson, my athletics training began at dawn, and my days frequently ended well past dusk. Yes, I was crazy enough to wear shorts since there were no changing facilities at the *maidan* I walked to each day. That one-kilometre walk became a daily ordeal, dogged by comments that sickened me and stares that bored holes all over my teenage body. Regular flashers dotted the route,

and it wasn't uncommon to have some man on a scooter come close enough to reach out and pat my bottom before zipping away. The *bhelwallah* on the corner invariably yelled out, '*Garma garam kachori khaogi? Chutney chat patti ke saath ...?*' It was a far from innocent remark ... mixed in that offer were centuries of putdowns. Girls like me, who didn't conform, 'deserved nothing better'. My grandmother would register protest each time she visited and spotted me in sports gear. 'That daughter of yours is asking for trouble ... shameless ... look at her bare legs ...' she'd tell my mother.

100      **The good part about this story is that I taught myself very early in life that it helps to be perceived as 'tough'—tougher than you actually are, or feel.** I took to carrying a javelin, hanging spiked shoes over my shoulder ... I considered karate, but there was no extra time for that in my crowded life. Besides, I'd always thought of myself as a non-violent person.

Till the day I delivered my first slap.

I was older by then, and a working woman, who walked back from the magazine office that was a couple of kilometres from my parents' home at Churchgate. Being in the heart of Mumbai's business district, I'd run into peak-hour commuter traffic—sweaty, harried worker-bees rushing towards Churchgate station to catch the 6.35 Fast. My pace would match theirs even though I had no train/bus to catch. One evening the crush of bodies was worse than usual, and I felt a clammy hand first on my arm, next on my waist (two bare inches of it, where the saree and

blouse don't meet), next the hand had moved further south. I whirled around and saw this most disgusting expression in the man's eyes. My hand flew to his face as I delivered a stinging slap, before swinging my heavy handbag across his chest. He looked startled ... but only momentarily. Then ... he laughed! Yes—he laughed! At what? My powerlessness to stop him from doing it again and again? I saw that mocking leer and lashed out at him once more (the crowd pushed past us in a couldn't-care-less way, determined to make that 6.35 Fast to Ghatkopar). He took two steps back and was gone within seconds, leaving me standing there feeling utterly violated and very foolish. I had tears of rage stinging my cheeks as I walked home. Should I tell mother, I asked myself. What was the point? My mother had never ever walked on any street by herself in her entire life. Come to think of it, she had never left her home unescorted. Ever. What would she know of the brutality right outside her home and hearth? What purpose would it serve to tell her?

101

Indian men are lecherous ... more lecherous than men in other cultures. This may sound like a generalization, but one does encounter this at all levels in every part of India. Women can rarely let their guard down—they aren't safe and they aren't respected. Female foreign tourists have the nastiest experiences travelling through India. Newspapers play down the stories because they've become so commonplace as to be boring to readers, who are likely to say laconically, 'What do these *goras* expect? Look at the way those women dress ...'

Which is hugely unfair, given that today's tourist is far better informed, and rarely do you spot a woman wearing inappropriate apparel. But yes, some of them are trusting enough to accompany a 'respectable-looking' stranger offering help or showing them around. Big mistake.

Leching is not restricted to strangers. It's the lechery *within families* that goes unrecognized and unpunished, because society does not encourage women to speak against male relatives who abuse their trust. Awareness levels remain ridiculously low, even as well-meaning NGOs step up efforts to empower women sufficiently so they can find the courage to nail the culprit.

102 **My bag-swinging days aren't over yet. But these days the punches are reserved for lechy men groping my daughters as we walk into a crowded zone.** The first time I collared an 'eve-teaser' (isn't it the silliest description for a creep? How our media guys love it!) touching my daughter's derriere casually was at the Gateway of India. We were about to climb into a catamaran taking us across the bay to the Mandwa jetty. In all that 'dhakka-bukki', I noticed a rat-like fellow approaching my youngest. He moved before I could and swiftly walked away with 'that' look of triumph in his beady eyes. I chased after the rodent, stopped him as he quickened his pace and 'thadaak', the back of my hand hit him squarely across the jaw. He squealed (I was wearing a large ring) and tried to run. My old athletics training helped me give chase.

My daughters were squirming ... red with embarrassment and trying hard to disown me. A crowd

gathered swiftly (a crowd gathers swiftly in India, regardless. Anything for a diversion, anything to beat up anyone, cause unknown). I left them to finish the job I'd started and rejoined my angry daughters. Seeing their expressions, I gave them one of my thundering Mommie speeches: 'It's because of girls like you that these men dare to behave in this manner. If you don't fight back, you'll encourage more such men. How dare he violate your dignity? How can you allow him to get away?' They looked unconvinced as they mumbled, 'Mom ... everybody was staring ...' I yelled, 'I don't care. I can handle stares ... but I will not tolerate groping.'

Today, the girls narrate this incident to their friends, their voices indicating amusement ... but also pride. 'Mom's crazy—but those men deserve it.' Unfair as it is, girls learn to be watchful at all times. Why should the onus be on them to 'save' themselves from assaults each time they step out? Scarily enough, two young girls were attacked and one slaughtered at the very same spot near Mumbai's landmark, Gateway of India, a couple of years ago. Their crime? Wearing jeans. And attitude. The man who attacked them with a knife in broad daylight was prompted by nothing more than the sight of carefree teenagers in tees and jeans, enjoying an innocent outing. Frustration levels seem to be at an all-time high with daily reports of unprovoked attacks on women all over India. I'm not even going into the ghastly statistics involving rape, acid attacks, domestic violence, dowry deaths and other crimes. Something awful seems to be happening just under the

surface of our carefully constructed civilized veneer. Yes, we've been a voyeuristic and repressed society for way too long, but things were supposed to have changed.

So what has changed? If anything, men seem to be really angry that they can no longer bash up women as freely and easily as the earlier generation did. At least on paper, there is legislation that's designed to protect women. All it takes is a phone call to the nearest cop station, and someone from the women's protection cell is supposed to show up within the hour to intervene, pick up the culprit, throw him into the clink—questions to follow later. Much later. The Domestic Violence Bill has been touted as a major breakthrough, with women's organizations thumping themselves on the back for the major victory they've scored. Unfortunately, the women who need this protection the most are unaware of the development—nobody's told them. They can't read or write, leave alone make a phone call.

The younger, better-educated generation is caught in a strange bind—they know they are in a position to do something about it, but don't want to be pro-active, since society continues to tacitly condone such conduct. A teenager I know sat silently next to his sobbing mother as she narrated the daily horror of being physically abused by her drunken husband. I turned to the strapping, strongly-built seventeen-year-old and asked him why he didn't protect his mother and physically stop his father from hitting her. He looked sullen and sheepish as he muttered. 'Dad's not always like this ... like, he's okay otherwise ...

but after he drinks, his behaviour changes.' I yelled at him saying, 'Aren't you ashamed of yourself ...?' He looked away, but did not flinch. Clearly, Dad paid all his bills and gave him a great deal of pocket money.

I have a theory: Today's urban men resent women who they perceive as threats to careers—their female colleagues. It's the BPO syndrome. Americans hate the call-centre Indians who've robbed them of jobs. Desi men hate women who have usurped their office space in a similar fashion. The only area of 'superiority' left is in the physical domain (alas, men are built stronger!). They use fists because they've already been vanquished in the brains department. 'Hit the bitch,' is the only way to get even. The bitch looks better. Earns more. Doesn't need men. It can't get any worse! Poor men!

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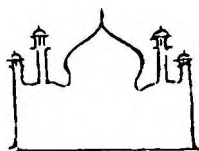
**There's something particularly *ajeeb* about our attitude to sex. Blame it on the masalas or sultry weather.** We have yet to find our own sexual groove, by which I mean, like the Brits love kinky sex and the Swedes believe in open relationships, we don't have a cultural cliché that's representative enough of our stated position. It's facile to say 'Oh ... but look at the staggering population—a billion-plus and still multiplying.' This only suggests that we breed. And we breed randomly, irresponsibly. We breed in ignorance.

But what does that tell you about how we react, how we feel, what we actually do with one another in the dark? No survey is valid, since most are conducted in the big cities and the data is far from representative. Which

'ghungatwali' village woman is going to open up and talk candidly about her sex life to a stranger wearing polyester pants? Which village man, for that matter, will share such secrets? Most of the rampant breeding takes place outside our metros.

'Cool' city folk are generally lovers who look more longingly at their pillows than their partners. In a startling survey, the *New York Times* stated that 51 per cent of women professionals in New York were single. Whether or not they wished to mingle, I don't know. My guess is, they did. But as the universal lament goes 'Mingle with whom?'

106 Men haven't changed a bit. But women have. And they refuse to settle for wimps, monsters or bores. The gays obviously don't want them 'thataway', and the straight guys aren't worth wanting. This has become a worldwide syndrome—I mean, even Paris Hilton had difficulty finding dates, forcing her to turn celibate for a year! Taking stock is not going to be all that easy. I asked Rohini (our ruling domestic), without whom our home would come to a standstill, why she's single given her age (thirty-two). She shrugs and asks me wryly, 'Where are the men?' She could be Mischa Barton or Sushmita Sen. Same problem. Zero solution!





Meet  
My  
Mrs



This is one of our most endearing habits. Endearing and enduring. I can recall my father's law ministry colleagues coming over to our home in New Delhi way back in the '50s and shyly introducing their wives thus. The 'Mrs' would fold her hands and say '*namaste*' to my father's own 'Mrs'—my mother. I kick myself now that both parents are no more and can't answer the question I'm about to pose: How did a woman feel when introduced in this evasive way? Did she mind the fact that her first name was of no consequence to anyone? Or even that without being a man's 'Mrs' she was non-existent, even invisible? Or was she genuinely happy to be someone's 'Mrs'? Rather than being a 'spinster' (as unmarried women were cruelly labelled).

In my mother's time, being a 'Mrs' was an end in itself. Men those days weren't self-conscious or politically correct about committing such a faux pas. They spoke naturally—as their forefathers used to. They voiced what was true in any patriarchal society—women (wives in particular) were men's possessions. Just like men owned cars, houses, tractors, bicycles, cows ... they owned their 'Mrs'. There was proprietorial pride in such an introduction. My mother didn't know she was supposed

to object to such objectification, either. **She was happy to go along with my father's introduction—no insult intended, none taken.**

110      These days, I often hear the 'other' version: 'Meet my Mr'. I love it. The misters blush but rarely protest. There is this lovely, hard-working Maharashtrian journalist who whizzes around the city on a scooter, while her husband manages their young daughter, and works part-time in an office close to their suburban home. Even in his absence she always but always refers to him as 'her Mr'. And I never fail to ask, 'So ... how is your Mr?' If she senses traces of irony in my voice, she certainly doesn't reveal it. I say it affectionately, but also hoping she'll catch on some day that without her realizing it, the tables have been neatly turned in under ten years.

I meet quite a few such 'Misters' who have no problem with either their nomenclature or their roles. In fact, it was only the other day that an old girlfriend of mine announced at the table that she'd asked her husband to quit his job and come work for her! I held my breath, knowing her husband's ego and quick temper. Since this announcement was made in the presence of several fairly important people (and after three whiskies), chances of a blowout were pretty high. To my utter delight, her husband, a retired banker, laughed and said, 'My wife is a remarkable woman ... her business is doing well. She is making good money ... I might take her up on the offer.'

I egged on my friend by asking, 'But how much are you willing to give him in your company? Equity? Salary? What

are the terms?' She smiled, 'I think a 35 per cent stake is pretty fair.' My immediate response? 'Are you mad—it's way too high.' The words were out of my mouth before I could stop them. There was a brief pause before the husband made light of my indiscreet comment by saying, 'I can see whose side you're on ...'

The significant thing is that attitudes have changed—and changed pretty radically. This is the same woman who has spent most of her married life being a 'Mrs', looking after her in-laws, raising kids and being a ideal corporate wife. Suddenly, she has come into her own and doesn't want to down-play her newly-acquired power or status. Well ... good for her. The 'Mr' seems confident enough to share his wife's success without feeling diminished. He has himself worked hard all his life and is acknowledged as a leading finance guy in his circles. I passed him an extra portion of the delectable dessert (pistachio dacquoise)—he'd earned it, in my eyes. The best part is that nobody else at the table sniggered. Ditto, when a shrill promoter of a movie production house, boasted, 'When I met this bloke ... I said to myself, "I can either hire him or marry him." I did the latter ... and now he works for me! I guess I met both objectives in one move.'

111

The consort and the con

Ditto, again, for a professor working on a dissertation who came to meet me from a distant town in Maharashtra,

accompanied by her 'Mr', whose job it was to take pictures of the two of us in conversation, and hang on to a large bouquet of flowers, plus a box of *mithai* they'd carefully carried with them during their train/bus/taxi journey. The lady whipped out a long, detailed questionnaire, while the 'Mr' fished out an old-fashioned, bulky tape-recorder and fiddled around with the wires, testing, retesting, making sure the contraption was working. I didn't hear his voice for the two long hours the extensive interview took. Finally, it was done, and the 'Mr' played back the tape to ensure the machine hadn't let them down. His big grin (the first one in two hours) revealed his relief, as he mopped his brow and beamed at his sweet, earnest 'Mrs'.

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It was time for pictures, which he diligently took from every conceivable angle. The bouquet/*mithai* presentation was similarly frozen on film for posterity. The only thing left was a 'goodbye'. The 'Mrs' walked with a light step towards the exit, with the mister trailing. Suddenly, he stopped and turned to me. What followed broke my heart. He spoke with such sincerity and pride about his wife's 'dedication' and 'commitment'. He thanked me with tears in his eyes for fulfilling his 'Mrs's' dream and asked for blessings. I felt small and foolish.

Later that night I narrated the incident to my husband—my own 'Mr'. I also told my father the story, thinking he'd understand the situation somehow. He fell silent before chuckling dismissively. 'What a wimp,' he finally declared, using a Marathi equivalent for 'wimp'. This was one 'Mr' who'd never make the cut with my father or his generation,

men who, for all their progressive thinking, exposure and education still believed strongly in the traditional roles assigned to the 'Mrs'. As my father would often point out in a self-congratulatory way, 'I never left your mother out while attending official functions. She was always by my side ...' Oh yes, I can recall those outings clearly. I do know my father introduced her with the 'Meet my Mrs' opening line. What I'll never know is how Aie reacted.

But as he frequently reminded me of the fact that my mother accompanied him at all was a big move in his family. I think of my mother's protected life and the startling knowledge that she'd never ever ventured out on her own. And I compare my own mobility, travelling around the world, booking online tickets, arriving at strange destinations without knowing anyone, and somehow 'managing'. It's hard and I don't really enjoy it. Often I feel like a big, fat pretender, a fraud.

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Power lady? Ha! If the world only knew my anxieties and fears each time I walk into an airport! It's not all that easy to shrug off years of conditioning. It's not easy to obliterate one's mother's life, circumscribed by tradition and role-playing. I suspect there's more than I care to admit of that life, deep within me. Secretely, I often fantasize that I've switched places with my mother. For a while that fantasy looks so appealing. **What a 'safe' existence—no risks to be taken. Everything handled by the 'Mr'. No stressing about an uncertain future. And look at my life—each day throws up something unexpected, sometimes pleasant, sometimes not.**

Swimming in shark-infested waters, learning to negotiate, compelling myself to 'cope'. Surely there have to be easier options? There must. Maybe, I'm longing to hear my own husband introducing me with a reticent, 'Meet my Mrs'. And there I would be, eyes lowered, three steps behind him, smiling a perfectly controlled half-smile, speaking only when spoken to, never interrupting, never arguing, never contradicting. An obedient, well-behaved 'Mrs', an asset of the old-fashioned kind—quiet, non-threatening, willing to compromise, eager to please, not looking beyond the hearth of my well-run home, forgetting about the enticing world out there ... the opportunities and attractions that still make me slightly breathless when I think of them.

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Brazil! Barbados! Oh ... Buenos Aires ... dancing the tango with Al Pacino, learning belly dancing in Cairo, swimming in the Bosphorus, dining in Moscow with a mafia hit-man, smoking in an opium den in Shanghai, bungee-jumping ... para-sailing ... jet-skiing. When I start on this trip, there's no stopping the images, there's no time to waste ... that's when my iPod rescues me. Like right now. I drown myself in Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan's *dhadkan* and the pain becomes easier to bear ... '*Dulhe ka sehra suhana lagta hai*,' he sings, and I can see a newly-minted 'Mr', with his 'Mrs'. It brings a smile to my lips. But the tears in my eyes are equally real. **I'll never be that 'Mrs'. And I don't know whether that's a blessing or a curse!**



## Indians love festivals

'*Holi Hai ...*' Yes it's true. We celebrate something or the other on an everyday basis. Have festival, will enjoy. This has little to do with our booming economy, or the fact that Young India has lots of *chillar* to splurge on some festivity or the other. It was always like this and so it shall remain. Foreigners find it difficult to appreciate the number of public holidays we enjoy in a calendar year. To us, even this staggeringly high number seems hopelessly inadequate. We are forever agitating for more 'sectional' *chhuttis*, more 'optional' days off. The reasons are always the same. 'We are celebrating ...' Nobody asks 'what'? Maybe 'Mahashivratri'? Why not?

115

It is taken for granted that it is an important family occasion that cannot be skipped by a single member. Kids bunk school, adults bunk office, the elderly wait to eat *laddoos* and the party gets underway. Compare that to the fixed holidays in the West—there's X'mas, of course, that overwhelms the rest of the world and sweeps everybody along. And there's Easter, Lent and two National Days (4<sup>th</sup> of July and ... and ... Guy Fawkes? Don't know, don't care).

But, as I write this on the eve of Holi, I can feel my heart leaping up ... I like to think I loathe Holi, but I know I'll get drawn into the insane revelry, regardless. Bollywood toned down its Holi madness in 2007, with the Bachchans cancelling their annual colour-orgy, since the senior Mrs Bachchan was ailing in hospital. But in the rest of the

country, the rowdies were ready with their *pichkaris* and *gaalis*, their *bhang* and *thandai* craziness. What is quite astonishing about Holi is the way society sanctions total abandon, verbal and physical abuse, outright leching, pawing, groping—all in the name of celebrating a spring festival. It is the closest we come to the Mardi Gras in Brazil or New Orleans. There are countless theories and explanations as to why we smear colour so liberally on each other during Holi, but I don't buy those explanations. It is simply about catharsis and an annual release.

116 For one day of the year, people forget to behave themselves and it's vastly amusing to watch staid, dull individuals occupy other far more colourful skins as they dance uninhibitedly with complete strangers, down several glasses of *bhang* and get drenched to the skin.

**Oh ... that wet saree strikes again!** What's it about a woman's buttocks covered by a thin, diaphanous veil of fabric that leaves absolutely nothing to the imagination and drives society crazy? Film-makers from Raj Kapoor to Ram Gopal Verma repeatedly showcase their heroines' assets in clinging, wet sarees, film after film. Some refer to this as the ultimate Wet Dream for sex-starved Indians, and I suspect they're right on target. Holi parties are incomplete without a pool of brightly coloured water into which women are physically thrown, feigning fright and embarrassment. They squeal with delight and scream orgasmically, as strangers pick them up, kicking, and 'protesting', before dunking the ladies into the inviting tank. Once thoroughly drenched, the mermaids are ready

to jiggle and wiggle to standard Bollywood hits like '*Rang barse ...*' As the afternoon progresses and the bhang kicks in, one sees some strange and bewildering sights—couplings that are as weird as they're unexpected. But as the spirit of Holi dictates—all is conveniently forgotten the very next day after the *nasha* of the potent bhang comes down. *Raat gayee, baat gayee*. Convenient! The once inebriated idiots sensibly avoid eye contact and get back into the sober, boring, predictable world in which every married woman is a 'Bhabhiji' and every married guy is a 'Bhaisaab'. These are but a few charming hypocrisies of our amazing society. We need these annual rituals, or else, we'd all go mad.

Holi is an example of how bizarrely the Pleasure Principle works in our lives. I thought of that a few days before Holi, when the moon was three-quarters full and high in the sky, providing a stunning 'prop' to the thirteenth-century Sun Temple at Konarak. My husband and I had just been taken through a crash course in erotica by our very enthusiastic guide called Upendra. After a weak attempt at explaining the 'deep, philosophical, spiritual' aspects of this magnificent monument, he'd wisely decided to zero in on the explicitly depicted sex acts in the frescoes that dominate the temple walls and have intrigued scholars for centuries. Upendra looked at me knowingly, winked at my husband conspiratorially, before stage-whispering, 'All positions, all combinations, all postures ... man-woman, lesbian ladies, two men with one woman, women with animals, men with animals ... here it is possible to see all

sex acts.' I tried to stare but in an 'academic' sort of way, more than aware of the fact that Upendra himself was staring intently at me! He sidled up to point out a panel which depicted a dog performing cunnilingus on a woman. 'That is ancient way of preventing infection to woman's private parts ...' Now, that was a new one! 'Ancient times ... not possible for infected woman to go to a doctor ... nor another woman ... to show dirty private parts ... secret thing. So ... woman call dog. Dog lick her privacy properly. Dog's saliva having antibiotic ... woman's private part cured ... nobody knowing. Secret kept.' Oh God! What would happen to those divine *apsaras* if the local *rishi* got to know they'd been up to tricks and contracted some unmentionable STD? Would the *rishi* shoot the man ... or the dog? Upendra's earnest explanations of the doggie position were still better.

'Man behaving like a *kutta* ... see ... doing kutta things ...' I wanted to tell him men the world over behave like kuttas, most *are* kuttas ... but said to myself, '*Jaane do ...*' why deliver a *bhaashan* on feminism in such a beautiful setting?

As we drove off to Jagannath Puri, my heart was still in Konarak, wondering what those magic-fingered sculptors were thinking while carving the inventive sex tableaux. A local lecturer had provided three theories. Theory number one: Since the temple took twelve long years to build, carving copulating couples kept the stone-cutters happy! If they couldn't do it, they could sculpt it! Theory number two: It was the great king's attempt to encourage his subjects

to go forth and multiply, since there was a serious population problem (low) at the time. Theory number three: Sex equals enlightenment. Devotees who could leave carnal desire at the gates of the temple, after getting an eyeful, were the ones who'd reach God. It all sounded like bunkum to me. But his softly-accented Oriya-English was enchanting enough for people to buy all those loony theories wholesale!

An hour later we were at one of Hinduism's most revered *sthaans*—the centuries-old Jagannath Mandir, which is one of the few temples that ban the entry of non-Hindus. I recalled an earlier visit when I'd been mistaken for Benazir Bhutto's sister (I was wearing a pink Ritu Kumar salwar kameez, no bindi). Gheraoed by aggressive temple *pandas* demanding I recite the Gayatri Mantra and reveal my *gotra*, I'd fled, swearing never to return. But here I was, surrounded by fawning temple officials who'd seen me on some TV show. Our party was escorted straight into the sanctum sanctorum, while tribals in tattered sarees were pushed around and harangued to part with the few coins they possessed.

119

'For *bhog*, madam, for God ... not for us ... never for us,' an oily panda with bleached forelocks and a rakish smile told me, while adjusting his low-slung dhoti. He looked ready to audition as an extra in a Bhojpuri film. There were hundred of widows, clapping in a desultory way, as the evening *aarti* was in progress, with loud chanting and clanging of bells. I'd just seen Deepa Mehta's *Water*, and found the entire scene with the widows most troubling.

'Nobody touches them, madam, they are here for darshan purpose only ... peoples are feeding rice everyday ... peoples giving much charity ... no problems for ladies.' The world's biggest 'rice market' located in the temple courtyard was crowded all right—gigantic mud vessels filled to the brim with cooked rice were being steadily emptied by a constant stream of the faithful buying bhog and consuming it greedily. We were urged to eat freshly-made *rabdi* with greasy parathas. 'God's food ... not to refuse,' the rakish panda said, addressing every word to my chest.

120 Right outside, on the wide street over which the Jagannath annual chariot *yatra* moves in splendour, there were dozens of lepers and beggars. It was all terribly disturbing and I found myself getting distracted, even disgusted. Holi preparations were on, with phallic-looking plastic pichkaris dominating roadside stalls and handcarts. It was a long drive back to the fancy hotel with acrylic elephants and plastic pelicans positioned on the premises. The busy route was without lights or facilities. Considering Bhubaneswar/Puri are prime destinations, it was especially distressing to note the indifference of the local administration. All one could spot at key intersections were statues of Biju Patnaik, the most-loved leader of Orissa. Nearly everything in sight is named after Patnaik, starting with the airport.

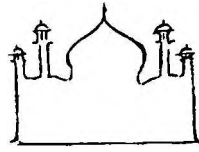
Despite World Heritage Site status, the place remains desolate and hopelessly underdeveloped. No wonder 48 per cent of Orissa's people exist below the poverty line.

Shocking! And no wonder it is the state with the highest rate of infant mortality. And children routinely die of malnutrition. 'Nobody cares,' said a government officer laconically. Least of all the Centre. Neglected for decades, Orissa is seething under the surface, and the Naxalite presence growing steadily. As an officer informed us, 'The state government is courting big business—we are trying to attract foreign capital, inviting people to invest in mining. They are coming ... of course, they will ... to rape us. The poor farmer will be rendered a pauper, his lands taken away for so-called "development". Do you know what they're offering our people for one acre of farmland, which they've cultivated for generations? A measly 35,000 rupees! We should learn from our neighbours in West Bengal, where the farmers will not part with even an inch, unless they get their fair price—anything from 10 lakhs onwards.' (This was said before the Nandigram massacre.)

121

We passed paddy fields where the second rabi crop was being sown by emaciated women, bent double. Close by flowed the Daya river, its bed nearly dry. 'This is the River of Blood,' our guide said solemnly. 'It was here that the great Emperor Ashoka decided to renounce violence and embrace Buddhism, after the river turned red with the blood of slain soldiers.' All in all, my senses were protesting as we drove into the hotel's grand foyer, where a talkative bunch of 'entrepreneurs' was getting ready for a Leadership Series. What irony! And to think, a few miles away, Emperor Ashoka's historic rock inscriptions were left in the shabbiest of states, with a bright blue wire meshing

cage 'protecting' this national treasure. And inside that cage were workers' clothes and farm implements, rags, bottles and other junk, thrown against the preachings of peace from a leader who had the courage to turn his back on unbridled power and walk away in search of salvation.





Indians  
are  
Peace-loving



Peace. Such a loaded word. Especially in today's ghastly times. In place of 'Rivers of Blood', and an ironically named river called 'Daya' (compassion), we have Streets of Blood. Violence dominates our news, and it's as if we've conditioned ourselves to expect bloodbaths on a regular basis. Nobody bats an eyelid while reading about/viewing the goriest scenes. And yet, it is one of our ongoing self-delusionary beliefs that we are indeed a peace-loving nation. It is an entirely bogus claim, of course. But we cling on to the image of ever-smiling people who wouldn't hurt a fly. Point out historical references or provide statistics and the same people turn into belligerent argumentative beasts ready to clobber anybody who suggests anything to the contrary.

It is only in India that young children are not stopped by adults (who should know better) from pelting stones at defenceless animals—puppies, kittens, ponies. Why? Because they can! Because foolish adults smile indulgently at these *naadaan* bachchas who are only 'playing'. Shocking, but true. Even in tiny hamlets, a passing vehicle attracts stone-chucking by idle, bored kids who're probably tired of sneaking up on a just-born calf to hit it mercilessly with a branch of a tree. Mothers shake their heads with a 'kids

will be kids' look, while fathers stare stonily at the larger bullock they've just whipped for not pulling the cart fast enough. Take that further: In Mumbai, where millions (yes, millions) of commuters hang out of overcrowded train compartments, getting to and from work, it is not uncommon for kids along the tracks to hurl stones at those poor workers, and blind or maim them in the bargain. Pictures appear in the dailies the next day, of someone who has lost an eye, someone else with a gash to his head. Everybody tch-tches. 'This is terrible. Catch the culprits,' the Enraged Citizen yells. Nothing happens. The police commissioner is *always* away in Delhi. And local MPs are too busy partying to bother with a lost eye or gashed head. Life is cheap in India, man! Train accidents, bomb blasts, floods, earthquakes, natural devastation ... unnatural devastation, riots, knifings, killings, shoot-outs ... on the hour, every hour. You can count on something truly terrible

Our morbid  
preoccupation  
with the macabre  
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references

taking place round the clock. We are so used to it, we hardly notice. It is like an eczema patch—sure it itches, but soon the itch itself becomes a habit. And if the itch goes away, one starts missing the urge to scratch, scratch, scratch till the patch bleeds.

We are fascinated by violence. Anything dripping

blood becomes instantly riveting. People can watch an accident victim without moving or blinking for hours. I often wonder what exactly they're staring at—the open oozing wounds? Crushed limbs? Pulped brains? What?

Our morbid preoccupation with the macabre must have something to do with our mythology, which is replete with the most startling references to ghastly acts perpetrated by otherwise sane individuals on the innocent. Rishis such as Dronacharya demand a severed thumb from disciples such as Eklavya, and the *Mahabharat* is so sickeningly gory, it leaves you wondering why anyone would wish such awful fate to befall anyone else. No wonder we don't ourselves recoil at cruel and sadistic practices. And look at our history. Our kings and emperors had their relatives' skulls crushed under the gigantic feet of elephants. Traitors were thrown into cauldrons of boiling oil, enemies were hacked to pieces, limb from limb. Children speared to death ... these images are so embedded in our minds that when they recur, we don't condemn them. We 'recognize' them as being somehow known to us.

127

Much has been written about the riots that rocked Mumbai in '92-'93. A movie (*Black Friday*) that deals with the subject in an upfront way was blocked for years. Viewers who eventually got to watch it in plush multiplexes came out of the theatres in the state of a James Bond martini—shaken but not stirred. Near one of those movie halls is an American-style diner named, incongruously enough, 'Ruby Friday', without wincing at the name ... that's how we've immunized ourselves. No pain, no gain, they say. But

here in Mumbai it's the reverse that works—no gain, much pain.

128 I remember returning from our farmhouse in Alibagh the first day of the riots, and watching the skyline with mounting horror. Feathery plumes of smoke were touching the evening sky as countless fires burned through the metropolis. The boat ferrying us back to the historic Gateway of India was crammed with anxious folk staring disbelievingly at the grey spirals of soot, followed by neon-orange tongues of fire, licking the thick blanket of smoke that hung ominously over the eerily silent city. For once, Mumbai's shrill, high-pitched clarion call was silenced by something bigger than itself ... something entirely unexpected and therefore unplanned for. A terrorist attack? In Mumbai?? Oh ... come on ... why us? We are so cosmopolitan ... so urbane ... so tolerant ... so apolitical ... how silly of 'them' to attack 'us'. **We understand just one thing—money. We are interested in just one thing—more money.** Leave us alone, yaar, to make gobs of it. We are Mumbaiwallahs, bhai, not those Delhi-types. We make movies, we entertain the rest of India. We pay our taxes—the highest in the country. And we produce good cricketers, well ... we used to, till Ganguly and those Punjabi fellows came into the picture.

Mumbai has gone into an unfashionable 'Martyr Mode', which is at a total variance to its earlier self-image. Bombay used to be *bindaas*—a complacent world by itself—self-congratulatory and almost childish in the way it would boast about its 'amazing spirit'. Mumbai is a martyr. In fact,

Bombay was like an attractive but giddy teenager, immature at many levels but with the rather charming wiles of a precocious young person. Bombay believed in its own invulnerability ('Nothing can touch us ... we are so special'). And then, all these myths got cruelly shattered. Bombay's delusions about its indestructibility were snatched away—and the scary part was how effortlessly the plan was executed. It was as simple as sauntering in, placing the deadly bombs at strategic places, and sauntering out ... nice and easy. Bombay became Mumbai—polarized, divided, paranoid and unsafe.

The very metropolis that owes its reputation to its diverse mix, is now being pushed into differentiating between the 'Marathi *manoos*' and 'others'. What a shame! But of course, the average Mumbaikar will feign ignorance of this nasty development. 'It's a phase,' the person will say. The note of optimism is vague. The future looks pretty grim and 'non-inclusive'. But nobody wants to acknowledge as much.

129

So many years later, people are still bewildered by their memories. But have started to put on a brave face and discuss—you've guessed it—**Mumbai's 'amazing spirit'**, instead. We need to believe we are God's chosen people, 'special' in every way, or else we'd collapse and the already shaken metropolis would find it difficult to get its groove back in a hurry. This holds true for the rest of the country, too. We have all become experts at the game of 'Pretend'. **Let's pretend**. We can pretty much pretend to be whatever suits us at that moment.

Chameleon-like, we change colours to adapt to ever-new environments. Right-wing fanatics? Okay, we can deal with them. If we 'pretend' they aren't there, they may just go away. Naxalites planning a series of violent attacks? Ha ha ... don't be silly. The movement is long dead. Who remembers Charu Mazumdar these days? Maoists in our backyard? Never! They're busy in Nepal. Terrorists from Pakistan caught red-handed? Must be some mistake—these days, everybody is called a terrorist. We assure ourselves we are much better off than our neighbours. Which isn't saying very much, when you consider who those terrific neighbours are.

130 Sri Lanka (LTTE), Bangladesh (let's not start on these guys), Nepal (another royal blood bath on the cards) and of course, our favourite foe, Pakistan (**Hello, Dawood!**). Sure, we are better off—or are we really?

This so-called superiority comes from some ancient notion about our great and good civilization. Nobody has a clear idea as to what that represents in today's times. But we know we were great once ... and we believe we can be great again.

Not that we aren't great even now, but greater!

Violence? *Woh hota rehta hai* ... but basically *hum log bahut pyaare hai*. Yeah, right. Tell that to the victims of Godhra ... or to anybody who has ever lost a loved one in today's seething India. See if that cheesy line works, and if it doesn't ... run for your life, baby.



## Run like hell!

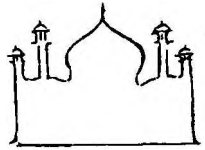
On our last visit to Darjeeling, that's exactly what we had to do—run for our lives. At the time we were busy being 'aware' parents, determined to take our children on a Bharat Darshan. Unlike some of our contemporaries whose idea of a family vacation didn't extend beyond London, we decided we'd be different and show our kids all that's good and wonderful about India. The irony of our well-intentioned decision hit us as we were rudely woken up by a hotel clerk who instructed us to pack immediately and leave the picturesque hill station as fast as possible. 'A *bandh* has been declared—the first one in Darjeeling's history.' We were rather cross to be disturbed at that hour, but thought it wise to pay attention to an agitated local. We were ready to go in under an hour. Kalimpong beckoned, and besides, the driver of our hired vehicle wasn't prepared to hang around for even ten extra minutes. 'They are coming . . . bombs, guns, knives . . . we go now. If you no go, then, I go . . . danger in Darjeeling ...'

131

Well ... it was true. We saw make-shift road blocks at the main intersections as Subhash Ghising's GNLF separatists got busy bringing everything to a grinding halt in this idyllic hill station in the Himalayas. 'What about our view of Kanchenjunga? And sunrise over Tiger Hill?' I pleaded. 'What about a bullet through your head?' my husband commented tersely.

That was a long, long time ago. But the problem has still not been resolved. Our Bharat Darshan got derailed

from that summer onwards. And worse, the children were so relieved ... of course, they preferred holidays in London, like every other 'phoren-obsessed' Indian. 'We can always see India when we are older,' they cheerfully assured us next summer when we brought up the subject. 'Too many hassles in India ... we might get killed,' added one, just to drive home the message. London bombings? 'It won't happen to us ...' *C'est la vie!*



‘Myself,  
Shobhaa Dé.  
What is Your  
Good Name?’



Myself getting most confused. Myself, never knowing fully how to answer such difficult questions. Myself acting smart sometimes and parodying ... errrr ... myself! There was a time I'd be irritated by such an introduction. If someone asked for my 'good name' (*shubh naam*), I'd counter, 'Sorry ... I don't have one. But **will a bad name do?**' These days, I know better. And find it rather endearing to be thus addressed. I reply blithely, 'Myself Shobhaa Dé. And yourself?' It works great. And establishes an instant rapport.

Besides, literal translations are far better than wild interpretations. '**We live on your backside**' is my new neighbour's way of informing me that his flat faces our back door. But, instead of saying it in Hindi, which a majority of Indians have a working knowledge of, my neighbour chose his version of English. Why? To show me he knows the language and is not some country bumpkin. This is something peculiar to us—we often refuse to converse in our own language or languages (since most Indians speak at least three, if not more), because we equate English with education, a bourgeois lifestyle and 'culture' (if you please!). I hear women saying, 'She is knowing very good English ... she is coming from a cultured family, you know.' This is

rather worrying, since it implies that those who have not been exposed to English in school/college are either uneducated or, worse, uncultured! Sixty years after the British left our shores we still associate a 'good' education with the ability to speak the language we inherited from them. Our old cook Subhash, semi-literate but smart as they come, decided to quit his job one day and relocate to a distant suburb. Why? 'Because I want my children to go to a good school and speak good English.' The school he'd enrolled them into in our neighbourhood was not a bad school, but the medium of education was Hindi, with Marathi as a second subject. 'What will my son do with Hindi and Marathi? I want him to be a big man with a good education some day. He must go to an English-medium-school.' Today, that boy is joining the merchant navy, and only speaks English! So ... did Subhash make a good move back then, or what?

This is a vexing question, particularly for those of us whose medium of *thought* is English. It's not a 'foreign' language to us. **In many ways, it is our only language.** People find it strange when I tell them I dream in English, or count in English. If someone were to shake me awake in the middle of the night, I'd yell, 'Hey ... stop it. What's happened?' Not, '*Kya ho gaya?*' Is this a plus or a minus? Frankly, I don't care. It is the way it is. Not just for me, but for millions of other urban Indians who grew up believing English was 'their' language ... not a foreign one that had to be mastered in order to get ahead in life. In my case, I was enrolled in a Scottish missionary school, went to a

Spanish Jesuit college, and grew up with people who also used English as a first language. Sounds weird. But there it is!

I no longer feel apologetic about this, not even when someone tries to provoke me by saying, 'But how come you don't write in Marathi—it is your mother tongue, after all.' Marathi is definitely my mother tongue. It was the tongue my mother spoke to me in for a few short years. It was *her* tongue. Not mine. But I spoke to my mother mainly in English—and she certainly didn't mind! I spoke to my father in English as well, right up to his last day, when he walked me to the elevator of his fifth floor flat and saw me off with a cheery, 'Bye darling ... come again soon!' He did not find it odd either that we invariably spoke to one another in a language that wasn't our own. Ditto for husband and kids. We converse in English, not Bengali. It's the language that comes most easily to us. In fact, it is our unthinking and entirely spontaneous form of expression. It stumps foreigners who (legitimately) wonder—how come?

137

Interestingly enough, my mother picked up conversational English once her four children started attending school in Delhi. That's when she learned Hindi as well—a rather strange version of it, spoken with a strong Garhwali accent since the two boys working in our modest government quarters were from Tehri-Garhwal. But once she began to use both languages, there was no stopping her. What nobody told my mother was that her slang-strewn English was not quite 'propah'.

It was *our* English! And she'd mastered it, listening to

all of us chatting with friends. She had no idea that adults used an entirely different, more formal idiom. I used to find her conversation completely cute. Imagine the picture—a traditionally dressed, conservative Maharashtrian wife of a senior government officer, sounding like a rock 'n' roller . . . ('This is one hell of a place—wow!') without realizing it! What was charming to my ears may have sounded strange to Delhi's stiff babus, whose wives never opened their mouths. Especially not at deadeningly-boring receptions and 'At Homes', where greetings were restricted to 'Hello ji ... ?' I adore Indian English and marvel at our inventiveness. We can bend English any which way we feel like and still succeed in communicating the essentials. This is a creative feat which deserves to be documented meticulously, for every few years we add phrases and expressions that reflect our evolving selves. 'Totally *jhakaas*' cannot be translated effectively enough. '*Phookat ka bhav mat khao*' is too delightful to ruin by explanation. 'He thinks too great of himself', or 'Stop eating my head, *baba*' are, again, beyond any translator's skills. '*Uski khopdi ulti hai, bhai*,' or '*Saala, peeyela sadela, khadoos, no-good aadmi hai—uski vaat laga do ...*' Dialogues from *Munnabhai*? Where do you think those dialogue-writers got those priceless lines from?

Purists despair that Indian-English is ruining the language skills of Gen Next. What they actually miss is the way Indians spoke/wrote sixty years ago. After the British left, one generation loyally clung to the Queen's English, refusing to acknowledge local inputs or twists. This 'Koi



Hai' generation has virtually disappeared. Most adherents are either dead or have retired injured. You can still meet these stiff-upper-lip relics in various gymkhanas and clubs across India, particularly in scenic hill stations down south, where uniformed bearers sporting cummerbunds and turbans pad around noiselessly in white tennis shoes, carrying gin 'n' tonic for the saabs and memsaabs on the lawns. Listening to their 'Jolly good show, old chap' level of conversation is a treat as rich as the trifle pudding that these clubs continue to serve ('*Khansaama* ... well done ... here's your *baksheesh* ...'). The language perfectly matches their genteel lives, spent in the company of like-minded folk, sipping light Darjeeling tea in the early afternoon, followed by cucumber sandwiches and pastries a little later. One doesn't hear that sort of English even in England any more. Nor does anybody elsewhere in the world bother to pen letters that address the recipient as 'Esq'. Comical? Absurd? Maybe. But also charming.

139

That's kewl!

Compare that to the more colourful 'cool' talk of Indian teenagers who think nothing of chutneyfying every form of communication—written and verbal. Their lingo is a defiant assertion of their Indianness. And their nonchalance is breathtaking in its total disregard for norms at any level. This is global communication at its most basic—everybody who is twenty (plus or minus), speaks 'Instant English'.

It's all about recognizing short forms, abbreviations, configurations and blatant distortions. Confusing? Not to the users. Time is of the essence for these impatient souls, and why waste precious micro seconds on writing out entire sentences when three or four letters of the alphabet can convey the same message ('R U ok? Gr8 2 b bk. LOL 2 u 2'). As long as it gets across, what difference does it make? SMS texting, e-mails—these are today's tools. Fast. To the point, no nonsense. I like! And *maaro goli* to those who have a problem with it.

140

Like a particularly annoying gentleman in a scruffy red shirt who went blue in the face at a book launch talking about how *bhasha* writers were getting a raw deal at the expense of 'elite' Indian-English writers who 'borrowed' the language of our former masters and walked away with fat advances and most of the laurels. He made an embarrassingly jingoistic speech, appealing to his audience to 'reject outright' these terrible writers who got paid for murdering English. He talked hysterically about loving one's '*matrubhasha*'. 'If you are a true Indian,' he thundered, 'you will take pride in your own heritage and turn your back on English books.' Oh dear God! This was getting stormy. I passed him a mint I'd saved up on my flight. He nearly threw it back in my face. I thought I saw smoke coming out of his ears (hairy and flapping). He glared at me with 'red-red eyes' (to match his shirt?) and continued his speech, quoting Neruda and lambasting all 'foreign' publishers (like Penguin!) who were effectively 'killing' regional writers.

He reminded me a little of those '60s 'commies' in our cities who'd rave and rant about capitalist pigs ... till someone smart offered them a swig or two of premium Scotch (smuggled, in dem days). Soon, the same lot would solicit invitations from the same pigs, to swig that same wretched whiskey and talk about corruption, degradation, compromise. Five years of Chivas later, they'd still be shabbily dressed in shapeless khadi kurtas, they'd still carry torn *jholas* and swear by Marx, but by then, they'd have pot bellies, a suburban flat in an unmistakably bourgeois locality, and heaven help us, would be driving a Maruti car! I still meet these anachronisms ... they're still drinking Scotch at someone else's expense. They wear glasses, their eyes are rheumy and tired, they stoop a little, and shuffle along in rexine trainers. They get defensive when asked about their comrades (many dead). And the Lal Salaam has long been replaced by Lal Label (Long live Johnnie Walker). Keep walking, guys. Myself? Sometimes walking, sometimes sitting, but always 'simply' doing ... *Kyon Biddu ... aayi baat samajh mein?* Life *bahut* boring *ho jaata hai*, otherwise. My good self is like that only ... what to do??

141

## Schizo India

As every self-styled intellectual's favourite soundbyte goes: 'There are many Indias ... India lives in several centuries simultaneously ...' True, true, true. But don't other countries? Other civilizations? Go to Rome and you'll find

superstar india

exactly the same contrasts and contradictions. Go to Cairo ... you could be in Lucknow. Go anywhere—Paris, London, Istanbul. But we wear our absurdities like some exotic badge of honour (dodgy and dubious, as such things generally are). We are entirely comfortable with our neuroses and just as well. When we walk into a situation that has fifteenth century written all over it, we don't bat an eyelid, or even let the craziness get to us.

142 'Mera India,' we say philosophically, and move on, like any sensible person would. Very often, mutants like myself think, feel and behave exactly like foreigners do when they encounter India at its lunatic best. We also go into our Gee-whiz-this-can't-be-happening mode, our eyes widen, jaws drop and we stare shamelessly at ... at ... ourselves! At the whole snake-charmers-at-the-Gateway-of-India-cows-in-Connaught-Place-naked-fakirs-at-Chowringhee-ghoda-gaadis-at-Chowpatty thingie.

Join the 'How quaint! How cute' rabble without realizing how ridiculous we must appear to others—like those foreigners recording it all with their nifty digicams. The only area in which we differ is in the keen interest tourists take in our garbage heaps. They can't get enough of uncleared piles of muck but we drive past without smelling or seeing. We take dirt for granted. It is *supposed* to be dirty. Cleanliness deodorizes and disorients us. We feel almost uncomfortable with antiseptic floors. Most of our hospitals are filthy, with rats scurrying around corridors, cockroaches picnicking on leftovers and bloodied swabs, bandages littering the parking lot. Our temples are

unbelievably dirty ... it's difficult to think of God or the higher purpose of life when one's toes are being nibbled on by hungry rats, and there are pools of drain water everywhere. If we can't keep the house of God clean, what chance do our bathrooms have? They're *supposed* to be filthy—they are *bathrooms*. Floors will get wet, basins will be messy ... let's not get to the toilets.

Each time I come back from travelling out of Mumbai to another destination in India, I ask myself, 'Are we really better off living in this monstrous megapolis where we are forced to compromise on virtually every aspect of a civilized existence, because of poor facilities, zero administration? Shouldn't we be angry, demanding a better quality of life?' Standard argument. Mumbai pays exorbitant taxes to the centre. What do we get in return? This blah-blah has been going on for decades—nobody listening, because everybody knows nothing will happen. And yet, for some inexplicable, illogical and erratic reason, we who reside in Mumbai think we are special ... superior ... uber-cool. When, in reality, we are suckers and fools, subsidizing the rest of the country while picking up the tab. This is totally un-cool. But without self-delusions, we'd be really angry! If we get angry, we might stop obsessing over money and start obsessing over better terms. We think we are India's most glamorous city. We know Mumbai is a magnet that attracts over 300 families a day, who turn up from the back-of-beyond by train, bus and boat, never to leave. And yet, this very city, which cannot support its present population, is dreaming techni-coloured Shanghai Dreams!

Where I live in Mumbai on reclaimed land is an old village that has traditionally been inhabited by Kolis—Mumbai's well-known fisherfolk. Nothing much has changed over the centuries for this hard-working community. Their fishing nets are made out of tougher material these days (plastic), but the drying methods for small fish like bombil (bombay duck) remain the way they've always been, on improvised drying lines near sturdy wooden boats, painted yearly, a week before Holi.

### Same old story

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This year was no different. I was stuck at the traffic intersection right where the village begins and the boats festooned with multi-coloured flags are moored. I heard the sound of drummers and looked up to see a small wedding procession, en route to the temple inside the village. These people were from the bride's side, I realized, when I spotted a pretty young girl dressed in a traditional turmeric-tinted saree. She was walking with eyes downcast, and couldn't have been more than nineteen years old. Her motley group of relatives walked beside her, holding flower garlands and *thalis* with sarees and other gifts.

On the day, in another part of Mumbai, celebrities from across the world had gathered to celebrate the wedding of a forty-two-year-old 'famous' British person—a certain Elizabeth Hurley. Had I been a documentary film-maker, I would've covered both weddings, and for the same reason.

One represented the real thing—the humble fisherfolk were also sending off the bride with accompanying music and revelry. While Ms Hurley's entourage was doing pretty much the same, less than two kilometres away. It was only a matter of scale and perception. And who knows which of these two brides would be happier in the long run? The contrasts were there for all to see, but did they matter to anyone—naah!

It's the same story in most other cities. But apart from the day-to-day manifestation of these peculiarities, it is our mindset that is pretty weird. **Most people who claim to be very 'progressive', very 'forward thinking', are in fact, hiding behind a veil of prejudice and fear.** They want to sound politically correct and politically aware at all times and in regard to all things. But in reality, they are afraid and confused to make that leap of faith and admit that ours is a particularly screwed-up generation. We are the proverbial *dhobi-ka-kuttas*—we don't know where we belong (*na ghar ka, na ghat ka*). And we aren't sure about our essential identity. Our secret selves are pretty much the same. We detest aspects of our 'Indianness', we are ashamed of most 'desi' traits. We know we appear gauche and dehati to outsiders. And we realize the world makes fun of us. We are pretentious and supercilious for no good reason. And we love to preach. Oh, how we love sitting in judgement over everybody, pretending to be pious. Our favourite act is the annoying 'Holier-than-thou'. Even so, we need a little *teekhaapan*. Maybe we get on our own nerves, but rather than dealing with such irritants we take

it out on others by being disdainful. In our heart of hearts, we are fascinated by all things 'foreign'. And when we say foreign, we only point Westwards, when an Indian says, 'I'm going abroad,' it is taken for granted 'abroad' refers to Europe/America. Never Africa or Japan, or any other nation. We want foreigners (read Westerners) to like us ... admire us. When we are disappointed with our present (oh please, forget all that rah-rah India-Shining rubbish. It's more like India Bullshitting), we fall back on the past.

A very distant past

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**When all else fails, we pull out Gandhi. The Mahatma has saved India's ass in more ways than one. If he only knew how frequently and arbitrarily we use the Gandhi trick to impress outsiders. He is our trump card in any argument. We invoke his name when no other name rings a bell. If even that fails to impress, we begin boasting about our amazing 'culture' (our civilization is 5,000 years old, we tell awestruck Americans). We play the Heritage card as well when it suits us. Especially in the presence of ignorant, semi-educated visitors who don't know better. This colourful, intricate, 'culture blanket' is so convenient, it covers up our ugliest flaws and wounds. Ignorance breeds insouciance as we glibly brag away, not stopping to examine the half-baked theories being trotted out in a sad attempt to 'explain' social blights like dowry, casteism, sati or even that annual north Indian farce called**



Kadwa Chhauth. Rituals, celebrations, prejudices, discriminations—everything can be accommodated under this comfy rug. Including the ‘dot’ that marks the forehead of so many women across India. Combine the ‘dot’ with the ‘black beads’ (mangalsutra), throw in some mumbo-jumbo that gives it a hoary religious sanction, and you get a great story to narrate drunkenly at any bar in the world. If you can cleverly combine a ‘Gandhi’ (to rhyme with ‘randy’) story, that’s India in a nut-shell. By the way, Paris has four Indian restaurants with names ranging from ‘Gandhi’ to ‘Gandhiji’. Is the food strictly vegetarian? No booze? Hell, no—beef pasanda and Burgundies galore on all these menus.

This sort of parodying used to enrage me at one time, but no longer does, since I’ve reasoned, **it’s nobody’s fault but our own that most foreigners are so abysmally ignorant about one-sixth of the entire world—us!** Do a billion people really not count at all? Are we unimportant? How is it possible that so many voices are not heard? Are we invisible? Do the others not see? The rest are blind, deaf ... but not mute? Something idiotic happens in India (involving cows, snake-charmers, sadhus or elephants), and it’s instant news—well, Reuters and other agencies will run it as a one-column ‘fun’ item, along with similar ‘world’s tallest man found in Chechnya’ kind of stories. But anything that we feel good about (come on, let’s face it, the Brits left us broke and on the verge of starvation. Today, we not only feed ourselves but export foodgrains. Achievement? You bet!), is rarely covered by

the international press. It doesn't fit into the 'India Story' slot.

Unless it deals with IT. But even there, the more recent stories out of Bangalore are far from positive. Thomas Friedman did his bit for what was once a beautiful Garden City, and is now an overcrowded highly polluted horror story. But, as we all know, *The World is Flat* was one man's 'gee whiz' take on India, written with the naive exuberance of a schoolboy who thinks he has discovered Mars. Bangalore is a played-out story, and journos are looking for fresh angles. Shanghai?? Umm. Okay. But how much can one write about the Bund, the Art Deco precinct or the glitzy city on steroids that's attracting the world's high-rollers? Do I feel jealous at the undue (according to me) attention being showered on our old foes? Well, yes! I see it as a Machiavellian plot, designed to shake our confidence, maybe even demoralize us.

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**Why do we have to keep defending our policies vis-à-vis China?** Why do we find ourselves getting a bit of an inferiority complex when puffed-up investment bankers point out the advantages China has over India? Why don't we dare to challenge their views, or speak up? We can so easily shut up the doubting Thomases by pointing out India's true trump card—our biggest advantage—democracy. Yes, we are (still) a free people. Nobody can (with impunity) come around with bulldozers and clear a few square miles overnight, in order to attract foreign capital by allowing hi-rises to come up in the vacated plot. We have systems in place that safeguard the interests of

our people. Forget corrupt officials bending the rules. **The point is—the rules exist!** Do we say that to those smug people who are telling us ‘China is a more attractive destination to park funds in ...’? Yeah, honey. So go park your bloody funds there, for all we care ...

We don’t realize our own strengths. We don’t recognize our potential. We also join the chorus, and we are the first ones to trash ourselves. It’s a kiddish, knee-jerk reaction. We think we are pre-empting the critics. In fact, we are aiding and abetting our own downfall. The new ‘fear’ is that China is likely to take away our lucrative diamond-cutting business. ‘If that happens five years down the line Surat will sink,’ says a wild-eyed diamond merchant as we talk quietly during a rooftop soirée. ‘What is Surat doing about it?’ I ask, thinking it to be a pretty normal question. He looks totally stumped, as if such a thought is alien. He starts stammering: ‘Oh ... I mean ... yes ... we should do something ...’ See? **There’s no ‘Plan B’ in place. In India, there never is. If ‘Plan A’ bombs, we go back to the drawing board and reinvent the wheel.**

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This is seriously frustrating. But we refuse to address it as a national malaise. This is where we need to open our eyes and learn from more aggressive economies. How to leverage an advantage? Nobody has a clue. By the time we wake up, someone else has grabbed the idea and run with it all the way to the bank. Even our great IT story just ‘happened’. There was no method to that madness. But now that it has happened, are we thinking twenty years down the line? Forget twenty ... I’ll settle for five. Nope.

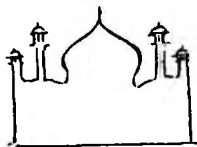
We are busy showing off our newly-acquired prowess and greedily counting the number of newly-minted billionaires making the *Forbes 500* List. So, okay, tiny little Japan is ahead of us on that list. But still. Those who are skeptical about the list itself have every right to feel that way. It is not as big a deal as it is made out to be. But, our new Big Boys on the block get a kick out of such recognition. And, I guess, it's okay to feel 'First World' when, for decades, we've all had to endure the 'Third World' stigma. Finally, we feel we can walk tall, with our chests out. Our glamorous industrialists can dominate Davos, flash their diamond-dripping wives and let the other veterans know we've arrived. How? Oh ... that's easy. By throwing the noisiest Bollywood-style bashes in that one-sleigh Swiss town. If the locals don't like it, they can lump it. For, our fellows know that it's only money that sings in this part of the world. And desi money is hitting all the high notes.

Behind all the bluster and posturing, are our industrialists really all that secure? We are busy buying out global conglomerates and spreading our wings, but scratch the surface and the mental make-up of even our most highly-rated businessmen remains pretty dated, if not medieval. Family-run empires have been slow to professionalize, preferring to manage their vast, publicly-listed companies like personal fiefdoms ... er ... mom-and-pop shows. Those that have gone forward in a modern manner have done so by relying heavily on foreign advice. The World Bank gurus continue to pull the strings, even if they do so behind the scenes. We still take our cues from

foreign 'experts'. Nothing wrong with that—why not pick the brains of those who've been there, done that? But in the process, I fear, we may damage our own unique approach to entrepreneurship.

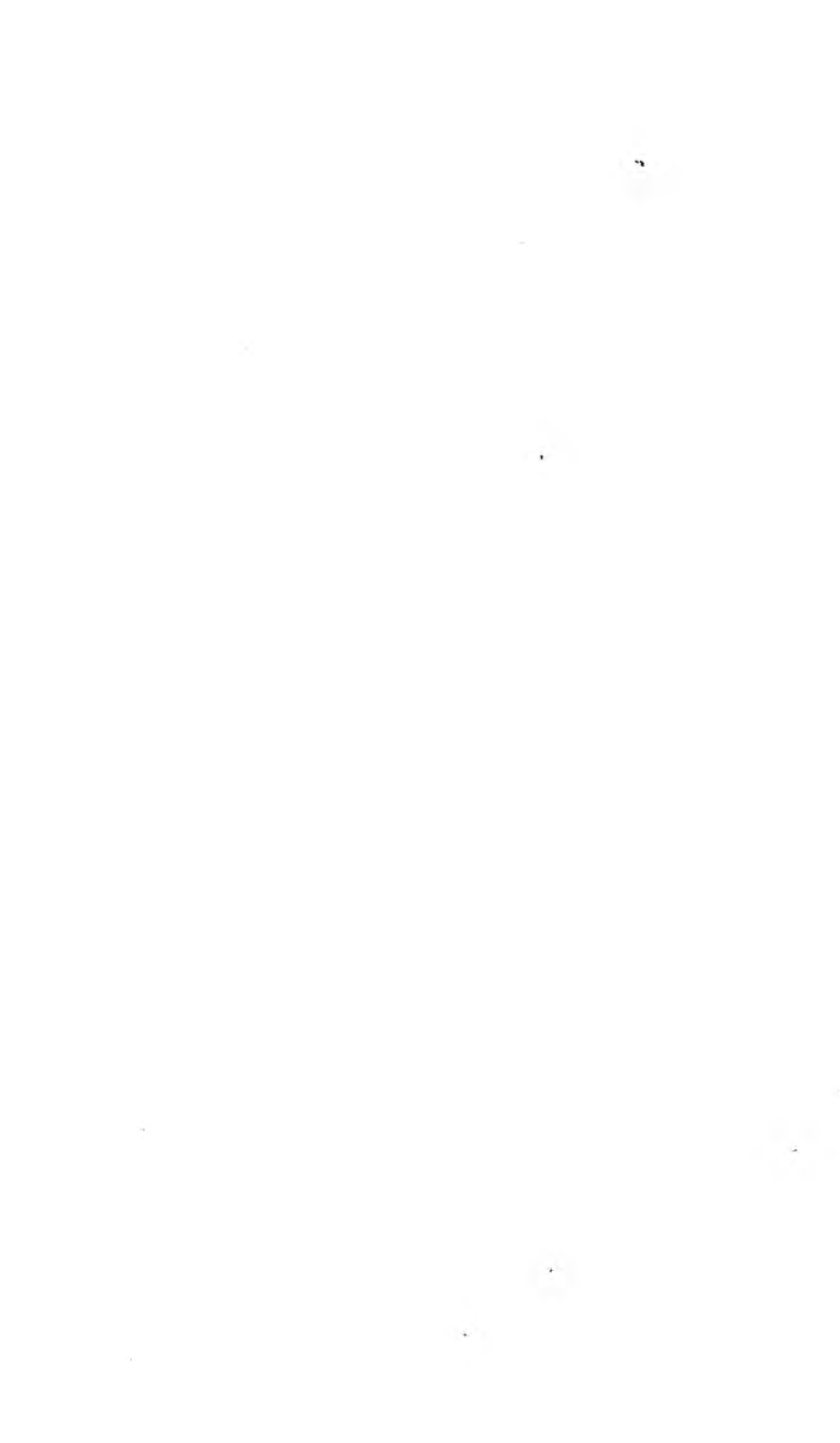
**We have native cunning combined with a sound education.** It is a pretty lethal combination that can give us a special edge. What we are doing is losing our touch with this very 'Indianness', that has seen us succeed on hostile, foreign shores (much like the Koreans and Chinese), by adopting a homogenized Western model of doing business. What works in those environments need not work in ours. Our methods are different, our objectives less defined (subterfuge is not such a bad word, after all!) but our capacity for hard work is legendary (check out the Patels who monopolize motels across the US), and our ambitions are second to none. Which is why it's important for us to cling on to the *Mahabharat* model, rather than memorize *The Prince*. Ideally, if we marry the two, we'd emerge clear winners.

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Only  
after a  
Fashion ...





I'm amazed that with all our new-found success in virtually every field, including fashion, we are still enamoured of all things Western. Is it just a hang-over from the colonial past? But then, our youth (remember, over 50 per cent of our one billion people are under thirty-five years old) have no recall of pre-Independence India. They neither know nor care what happened sixty years ago. They're far too busy enjoying the here-and-now.

A Shakira concert generates more excitement than if Charles and Camilla come a-calling. It is the grandparents who can still remember a time when the goras ruled. And, shocking as it sounds, a few from that generation speak nostalgically about how wonderful life used to be when the 'saabs and memsaabs' ruled India. One feels sorry for them, especially if they happen to be educated. It's another thing to hear a seventy-five-year-old bearer in one of those ancient clubs in, say, Coonoor, going on and on about what a pleasure it used to be to serve gora tea estate managers, and how well-behaved their *baba-log* were compared to the *jungle bachchas* of today's natives. 'India was better off under the British'—one can still overhear such comments, spoken without shame or self-consciousness. As and when I do, I seethe a little, bristle a little, but keep quiet. Not

because I think every Indian has to be unconditionally pro-India, but because I feel it's shameful to want to go back to virtual slavery, regardless of how enlightened and terrific the masters were. No self-respecting individual would (or should) want to endorse non-freedom. But such is the paradox in our perplexing country!

156 'We need a modern-day Mahatma,' I sometimes hear young collegiates say, when they are particularly disgusted with the current state of affairs. 'Why don't you get involved in that case?' I counter, urging them to become more aware of the political realities of the country. That is not an attractive option, they say in unison. If the young are already disillusioned and refuse to engage with their own country, what sort of change can one hope for in the next two decades?

Students are the ones who've always pushed for reform if they think it's needed (1968, Paris, is a good example). But Indian students appear either lazy, lackadaisical or worse, cynical. Why is the all-important fire missing from their bellies? Why aren't they taking to the streets, forming a movement and demanding answers? **What is the point of passing superficial judgements on the 'system' without even knowing what that system is or represents?**

It used to be fashionable in Kolkata and Delhi of the '60s to be thought of as a radical, a 'commie', a 'Naxal', a troublemaker. Women found it sexy. Men admired other men who walked around looking angry and talking about making Molotov cocktails, the way socialites discuss mixing

the perfect Cosmo these days. But by the time the '90s came around, those (fake) revolutionaries had discovered comfort. They were all in well-paid jobs ... married to a woman, not a cause. With prosperous beer bellies, a car or two in the garage, a weekend home, and kids in foreign universities, their revolution was dead even before it began. 'Sold out,' their contemporaries jeered, while congratulating themselves for having stayed out of that *chakkar*.

**'Where have all the jholawallahs gone?'** replaced the lyrics of Pete Seeger's anthem '*Where have all the flowers gone?*' Well ... the jholawallahs can still be spotted at arty events, but they now look dispirited and charmless, with greying scraggly hair, baggy breasts, bad teeth, dirty toenails and foul mouths. They don't know how crass they sound as they M-C B-C the world, while downing some rich man's liquor. It's pretty gloomy out there. I stare at George Fernandes on television as he stammers his way through interviews on Bofors (Oh God! I'm done with that bloody gun!), and I feel sad—George! Our Georgie Boy, the firebrand leader who was once called the giantkiller—so dashingly attractive in a rumpled-crumpled way, and look at him now—it's the same khadi kurta-pajama, the same jhola, but how out-of-sync and anachronistic that looks in the twenty-first century.

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I stare at some of the nouveau politicians—they remind me of a slightly raw Beaujolais—frisky but lacking in finesse, as they try and sound intelligent, discussing 'issues' that are beyond them. But my, my, aren't they spiffily

dressed—look at their Mont Blanc limited edition pens, or their Raghu Rathore *bandgalas*. Look at their designer shades (Oakleys? Prada?), and designer haircuts. **Tall and tanned and young and handsome, these guys are political playboys, flirting with their constituencies, two-timing loyal followers, playing footsie with enemies, french-kissing the media ... they know how to turn the game around. But young India believes playboys are better than pimps.** Those old geezers were the pits—oily, slimey, corrupt to the core. These guys are corrupt too, but they ‘look like us ... talk like us ...’ They are easier to ‘handle’. Yeah. Sure.

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Like Rahul Mahajan—young, privileged, good-looking—and what happened? Nobody could ‘handle’ this one. He turned out to be a bit too hot to handle, when found stark naked in a pool of his own vomit after a sex-and-drugs orgy that left another naked male companion dead. And this was the son of a murdered politician, about to take his dead father’s ashes for immersion in a holy river in Guwahati! Aah ... do we even remember Rahul’s father, Pramod Mahajan? The dynamic minister who was being touted as the future prime minister of India? The man who was once the media’s darling? It’s a lesson for all politicians, everywhere—it is all about the *kursi*. The day you vacate your office, you’re dead. And the day you die, you’re also ... errr ... dead. If the sons and daughters you leave behind are smart enough, they spend the rest of their lives flogging a dead horse—you! Or else, they slink away to lead lives of

anonymity, even penury (in case you've taken the secret bank account number to your pyre).

These days, I see Rahul Mahajan's pictures in the papers as a producer of films. The case against him is largely forgotten by the public. His allegedly battered wife has left him. His uncle, accused of murdering his own brother (Pramod) in cold blood, is languishing in jail—also forgotten. Who bothers and who cares? This is India, bhai—*Sab kuch chalta hai*—*dacaiti, atyachaar, ghooos, katal, bhrashtachaar*, rape. We have exceedingly short memories for crimes against humanity (give the Godhra carnage another year or two, and it will also be similarly reduced to a statistic). But we score big on Trivial Pursuits.

Ask anyone about Shah Rukh Khan's favourite pastime (chain-smoking), or the name of Kareena Kapoor's latest boyfriend, and you'll get an instant response. But anything to do with national tragedies, and people go blank. Perhaps wishing they'd never happened or pretending they actually didn't.

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Watching *The Last King of Scotland*, the award-winning film on Idi Amin, Uganda's tyrannical dictator, I felt numb just connecting with the mirror-images. It could've been a portrait of any politician in India. Any corrupt, brutal politician (no dearth of those). There came a point in the film when I forced myself to keep watching, telling myself, 'It's about Idi Amin and Uganda—don't take it so personally.'

But how could I not? It's such familiar terrain—the rise and rise of a poor, semi-literate, boorish monster, who surrounds himself with *chamchas*, harbours delusions of

grandeur, becomes a copybook, tinpot dictator, starts resembling a caricature of himself, kills anybody who is perceived as an opponent, amasses wealth, degenerates into a megalomaniac, descends into madness and finally disappears ... leaving a bloodied trail. **How many such samples has India produced, checked only by the saving grace of democracy?** How many potential despots have been stopped in their tracks just in time, thanks to timely intervention.

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Despite all these checks and balances, we have Narendra Modi in Gujarat (with a vast fan following—and never mind Godhra) and a Laloo Prasad Yadav from Bihar (India's most lawless state), we have Mayawati and Amar Singh in Uttar Pradesh, and several other candidates vying for the same ugly spot. There are documented stories (similar to those that emerged during Idi Amin's regime) of torture, mass killings, harassment and worse, of ordinary, innocent citizens suffering on account of political abuse. And yet, nothing changes, except on paper. We are thrilled each time there's a new legislation that empowers the powerless to some extent. All sorts of sops are handed out (and withdrawn!), making us believe hope is round the corner. The finance minister, P. Chidambaram, wrote off a hefty, staggering loan of Rs 60,000 crore owed by farmers, in the budget of 2008. This has enraged the elite (watch the Sensex crash, you guys!), but the naive belief is that the relieved farmers will stop committing suicide, now that they know they are debt-free. But it's hogwash, an eyewash, and those who're propagating such change know as much.

But that does not stop the well-oiled propaganda machine from grinding on. Milk schemes, food schemes, slum rehabilitation schemes, midday meals scheme, compensation to riot victims schemes ... there's no shortage of schemes, each one more noble than the other. What happens to these lofty initiatives? They disappear into thin air ... generally the minister loses his/her portfolio, for even initiating something that's pro-people. That's not the job description, you idiot. You're supposed to make as much money as possible during your tenure—keep some, pass the rest on.

A minister's primary function is to be a fund-collector for the party that has given them the job in the first place. Once you get that coveted job, you are supposed to super-glue your butt and hang in there. The longer you stick on, the better for everybody. It gives a minister enough time and scope to network, strike deals, get jiggy with it. In case that threatens someone else in the Cabinet who happens to be more powerful, marching orders follow swiftly, and sans explanations. The worst thing a principled (ha!), idealistic (double ha!) minister can do is his/her job. You are expected to make a pretty convincing show of it, of course. Announce big plans, mighty projects, talk of attracting mega foreign investments, make a noise in the media and circle the rest of the hoopla. But it's shadow-boxing and accepted as such. The day a minister takes these responsibilities seriously, you know it's going to be pack-up time soon.

Sycophancy is a national trait

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**Everybody is busy sucking up to somebody. This is ingrained in you as a child. If it's your primary school principal, then the buttering up begins even before you are born!** Anxious parents start cultivating these important people the day the urine tests positive for pregnancy. The scramble to get 'Baby' or 'Baba' into a good school is so frenzied, nobody wants to take a chance delaying. Principals become gods and goddesses till the run-up to the first interview. If the kid gets in, the flattery continues. This is just the beginning of a long affair. The toddler is told to please 'Uncle' or 'Aunty' by taking gifts on key occasions. Since the gifting itself is big business now, the toddler learns quickly. It's life's first lesson in *chamchagiri* and bribing: The more you give, the more you get.

Sickening but true. What hope is there for someone indoctrinated in this way from the tender age of three? Whether it's entry to the village *patshala*, or later, a job interview in a nationalized bank, the average Indian genuinely believes he/she has to illegally pay his/her way to get anywhere in life. Sycophancy becomes a natural offshoot. **When in doubt, flatter, is a national mantra.** You hear sweet words of pure bullshit, all the time. You think there's something wrong with the person if flowery, ridiculously exaggerated compliments aren't paid for some silly favour. Nobody is embarrassed, not even the recipient. It's the done thing, and it's done in a manner so obvious, so



grotesque, one feels like puking.

From school admissions to train tickets to passport renewals, the story remains the same. I needed a new booklet in my own passport recently. I was perfectly happy to take the standard route: apply ... wait ... wait ... wait. Till a travel agent told me to 'Stop being idiotic, call up the guy and *lagao maska*, you'll get your passport in three days!'

Well, this is an unbelievable but good story. And it's worth narrating: I did call up the guy. But saved on the maska (can't do it!). He asked me to go over the very next day, which I did. The procedure was explained in under two minutes, money paid and I was free to go home. The entire operation took under ten minutes. Nobody asked for a bribe. And even the underlings didn't hang around for *chai-paani paisa*. And, hello, it had nothing to do with the gentleman knowing me by name. There were at least thirty other applicants waiting to see him, and each one was handled with the same level of efficiency and courtesy.

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The point is: this particular officer is an exception. And because he's doing his job honestly, he's likely to lose it. I wasn't seeking a special favour and he wasn't doing me one. But most people in his position would've capitalized on the situation and extracted their pound of ... errr ... pounds! Or euros! Or dollars! That I'm marvelling at finding an honest officer is in itself a strong comment on how endemic this problem really is. But ... here comes an inevitable, hard-to-digest factoid: According to PERC, a risk consultancy service based in Hong Kong, India is the fifth most corrupt country in the Asian economy. There are

those who'll wiggle their eyebrows in amusement and chuckle, 'At least we have made it to the top ten ... not bad.' Like it's a World Cup Cricket rating.

Corruption has corroded the country in ways that are so insidious, we barely notice them. We passively go along, handing out fifty bucks to the cop who asks you to pull over for speeding or talking on the cell-phone while driving. 'It's quicker ... easier ...' we all shrug, adding, 'What's the point? If I refuse to give the guy baksheesh he'll take away my licence ... eff it ... I'll just pay and get out.' I've done it dozens of times myself. Cursed. Felt ashamed. Said, 'This is not on.' Scolded myself. Scolded the driver. And quietly paid up.

164 Palm-greasing is so prevalent, it's understood nothing will happen unless one offers an incentive. Even if all one wants is to get one's own money back. I remember the sort of humiliation my father had to endure for years in order to get his monthly pension. Considering his advanced years (he was in his nineties at the time), he had to physically present himself at the pension office to prove he wasn't dead before claiming the amount! Okay, I understand that procedures are procedures. And there have been countless scams involving imposters pocketing money meant for pensioners. My father didn't mind the drill. Nor did he take offence. But once he'd established his existence, it was another horror story, when petty clerks skimmed a few hundred bucks off the amount due for 'facilitating' the transaction. His early rage was soon replaced by resignation. He turned philosophical about the outrageous demand,

reasoning that the petty clerk probably had far too many financial responsibilities to deal with, whereas he didn't really need that pension himself. Even an upright, conscientious citizen like my father finally succumbed. He had no energy left to fight the nasty system. And that's really how it goes for a lot of like-minded people who get worn down and pay up, even though they find it morally reprehensible to do so.

It's a long, winding food-chain that nobody dares to break. Most argue, 'Corruption starts right at the very top of our society. If those sharks and whales can get away, why pounce on the small fry? Let the example be set by our leaders.' It makes me wonder: Are there any top dogs out there with a blemish-free record? The average Indian points to the House of Tatas. Whenever there is talk of a level playing field, good governance, transparency, we invoke the Tata name. It has been ingrained in us that it is one industrial house that is spotlessly clean. Nobody talks of Ratan Tata in anything less than a reverential way. We need a beacon. And in our minds, Ratan Tata is that beacon. Thanks to his forefathers, the TATA name is synonymous with squeaky-clean business practices. Nothing can dent that precious image or mar that well-guarded reputation. Overall, this is the sort of positive imaging the country requires. For, the Tatas have been spectacularly successful. ('Nano', anyone?) They are global players, and they've achieved that position by demonstrating their ability to do business in a mucky environment, without compromising on accepted, international standards. India singles them

out for praise and recognition, in the hope that others will follow. But given our convoluted laws, other business houses insist it's simply not possible to succeed without bending a few rules here and there.

166 Traditionally, business people by themselves had a somewhat dodgy reputation. Nobody trusted them, and nobody was willing to concede that not all of them were crooks. Our movies reflected this popular sentiment, each time a businessman appeared on the scene. He was shown as an unscrupulous slimeball who worshipped Mammon, and Mammon alone. Crude, merciless and villainous, he didn't stop at sadistically preventing his children from romancing a *garib* lover, generally the gorgeous-looking female lead star cast as an impoverished flower-seller, clad in appropriately arranged rags. The poor man-rich man theme was such a staple in the '50s, '60s, '70s and '80s, that to be seen as a *crorepati* was almost a crime, since it was assumed you'd gotten there through a devious window or two. It was only in the '90s, when people like Aziz Premji, Narayanmurthy and Ratan Tata (pioneering 'suit'!), placed India on the international business map, that perceptions changed. However, Raj Kapoor's stamp of disapproval on *ameer log* continues to dominate the screen. Mainstream Hindi movies rarely show a benevolent, well-loved tycoon, even if film-makers have wisely discarded the clichés of men in velvet smoking jackets, strutting around ghastly palatial homes featuring matching velvet drapes and gigantic stairways in the middle of a stadium-sized drawing room. TV soap-makers have borrowed this bizarre setting for

their serials these days, not realizing the absurdity of the visual. But then again, who would have thought a game show called *Kaun Banega Crorepati* would bring India to a standstill? With naked greed at its core, the show was phenomenally successful, as hopefuls across the country vied for the pot of gold. Based on a winning Western formula, the show shrewdly tapped into the new breed of avaricious Indians who'd do anything to make a fast buck. That the producers roped in Amitabh Bachchan as host is another story—an act of genius. *KBC* is dead today. But when it was on air, believe me, we could have been nuked during its telecast, and not cared! *Paisewalley log* are still a little suspect, but hostility levels are considerably reduced, now that IIT graduates are in the bag at pay packages exceeding a crore. Unthinkable! But I know, too, of young fashion models barely out of their teens who earn close to that within a couple of years of hitting the circuit.

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My favourite story revolves around a Bangladeshi male model I first met in Dhaka. It was at his first show and he was understandably nervous. Well-mannered, good-looking and clearly from a lower middle-class background, the boy was introduced to a well-connected fashion impresario from India by a hugely celebrated fashion designer from Bangladesh. Impressed by the model's physique, the designer invited the model to try his luck in India. In under a month, the young man arrived in Bangalore with hope in his eyes and hunger in his belly. As one of his mentors put it: 'He didn't have a fresh pair of underwear—he was that poor.' Plus, the boy couldn't speak either

English or Hindi—only Bengali. Today, this same person is on every designer's 'most wanted' list. What's more, he has found himself an agent in New York, and cracked a few prestigious global campaigns. He flies to Milan with the insouciance with which his contemporaries fly to Kolkata for shows. And yet, his fairytale story has a flaw—for all his success in India, the authorities gave him a run for his money, by refusing to extend his visa. Bureaucracy has a way of levelling everybody. But he has now mastered the ropes of paying his way past red tape. He laughs and says cheerfully, 'It's the same in my country ... worse, in fact.' And yes, he makes the sort of money it would've taken him more than thirty years of hard work and luck to make back home. People admire him for that and he's enjoying his celebrity.

Young people love money. Young Indians have finally shaken off their guilt pangs, inherited from seriously confused parents, where lolly is concerned. Money is very sexy. And a lot of youths will readily confess that if it's a toss-up between getting rich and getting laid, they'd take the first option. 'It's a rich man's world,' they carol, flipping through glossies that are so niched, one can handpick anything, from a customized commode with gold fixtures to a personal jet with a jacuzzi.

**No dream is too big for Indians these days. Everybody is dreaming it, in gaudy technicolour.** At one level it is thrilling, at another, pretty scary. My father's first car was a bulky, ugly Landmaster. Mine was a Merc. We both bought our cars with our own hard-earned

money. Mine was possible thanks to India's new mania—bank loans for any and every occasion. My father had to pay cash down. He was very proud of his car, and so were we. It was looked after like one of the family, and even worshipped on Dusshera day (along with the cook's cycle and our writing instruments). It was in this lumbering car that my father undertook road trips that were supposed to educate us and keep the family singing on those interminable highways. Weekend picnics, weekday outings—the good old Landmaster never let us down. And we never took the car for granted. It was there for official outings only. Nobody was allowed to casually 'borrow' it, not even my older brother Ashok.

When I acquired my car, everybody in the family took it for granted I needed it, while declaring, 'About time, too!' Nobody was particularly impressed. I was alone in my jubilation. I almost gloated as I took it for a 'blessing' to my favourite Hanuman temple on Colaba Causeway. There we stood, in the middle of a busy street, with curious foreigners staring as the priest broke a coconut, anointed the bonnet with a red *kumkum* swastika, garlanded the fender, poured holy water all around the vehicle, chanting auspicious mantras, while I stood next to my 'Midnight Queen' with a solemn expression, repeating prayers with the heady fragrance of *agarbattis* making my head spin. But my heart was soaring! No ... nearly bursting with pride. I'd done it! On my own. Thank you, car finance! Thank you, bank manager. It was really a long journey for a woman like me. A Merc! My Merc!! *Mine! Mine!*

Well, I was in my fifties before I could afford to buy my own car. (Using husband's car does not qualify.) And feel I'd earned it ... deserved it! My sons Rana and Aditya had both acquired fancy wheels in their early thirties. They believe they've earned and deserved them, too! Once again, car finance, *zindabad*! But it's the attitudinal change that's far more interesting. While I agonized over the EMIs (monthly instalments) and was worried sick whether I'd be able to shell out a pretty hefty amount month after month for eight long years, these guys have no such anxiety. 'Oh ... we'll find the money, what's the problem?' they ask, staring at their platinum credit cards. It took me years to acquire plastic. I was terrified at the thought I'd be tempted to overspend, or that I'd run up a huge debt, that creditors would hound me, or worse, send a goon squad to my residence in order to recover the amount. I had terrible visions lying awake at night, doing my sums and regretting a pricey, spontaneous purchase at a duty-free store in some exotic destination.

The future is plastic

I resisted getting a credit card till I'd hit my mid-forties. And even after I got the first one, I treated it like a highly inflammable object. I wasn't comfortable handling the small stiff rectangle for a really long time. Till today, my



first instinct is to pay cash (fortunately, I never have too much of that in my wallet). The children (all six have cards, will spend) laugh at my discomfiture, pointing to how easily the rest of the world transacts, thanks to this wonder card. 'Nobody in their right mind pays cash ...' they remind me. And my father's disapproving face looms in front of my eyes. To the best of my knowledge, he'd never ever used a credit card. The word 'credit' itself was a pretty bad one in his vocabulary. 'Buy only that which you can afford ... never a borrower nor a lender be ... cut the coat according to the ...' His words are embedded in my mind. I suffer pangs of guilt when I know I have over-indulged. The question of asking anybody to loan me even change-money therefore does not arise. I am not unique in this regard.

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My generation grew up with an extra sense of conservatism regarding money and expenditure. There was nothing called 'over-extended' in our relationship with the local bank manager. A negative balance was considered disgraceful. Today's generation is entirely credit-happy. They run up indecent bills without a worry in the world. And they manage to sleep very soundly at night, even knowing they're stone-broke. I'm told this is how the world spins.

'Financial management is about rolling resources, revolving funds ...' a cocky, young man told me, while trying to sell me something exorbitant that I didn't want. And the first image that came to me was that of a fourteen-year-old (Indian) girl I'd met in Singapore, nearly ten years ago. Her indulgent father's idea of a birthday gift had been to give the teenager a bouquet of credit cards. Her LV

wallet was so stuffed with every imaginable Privilege Card that when she hit the malls (every other day) she could virtually pick up whatever she fancied. 'It's normal', she told me breezily, while offering to pay for my purchases! More recently, on a short trip to Baroda to meet our daughter Radhika, I watched local teens shopping at a mall—they all paid with plastic. This is pretty radical for a society that has always put a huge premium on financial liquidity. Traditional money-lenders have been loathed and lampooned for centuries. Any popular Hindi film of the socialistic '60s would write in a character who was the village money-lender—detested by all for his cut-throat ways. The irony of the fact, that this individual has been replaced by a sharp banker offering to underwrite dreams, is completely lost on the euphoric middle-class person who can't get over the thrill of owning whatever can be financed by a friendly bank—a motorcycle, holiday, home, business. The arithmetic is far too complex and few people read the fine print. **Just the thought of 'ownership' is empowering enough. Young working couples break their backs trying to remain afloat while juggling loans.** There's no time to enjoy the perks of what they've worked so hard to achieve. So does it make sense to work this hard to create a lifestyle that there is insufficient time to actually enjoy? Malls in India are crowded with 'hotties' frantically searching for the perfect 'It' bag or the season's top accessory. Plastic smooths their journey as they negotiate their way in and out of international boutiques. This is the first generation of

women in India with an income to call their own. They still have to get used to the idea of spending their own lolly. In fact, the feeling is so alien, they experience dollops of guilt while splurging. Retail therapy in the Western sense is a comparatively new phenomenon. But those who've discovered its myriad virtues are as self-indulgent as their sisters in London, Milan, Paris or New York. Most belong to the special tribe of die-hard shoppers who can't get enough—the kind of over-indulgence that one associates with a Paris Hilton is now a lifestyle statement to be proudly flaunted by girls flashing titanium credit cards with no real limit. We are talking about successful professionals, not heiresses. These ladies raid malls on a bi-weekly basis, shop on the Net and are fiercely au courant regarding international trends. They travel. They shop. They have sex with strangers. If that sounds like a promo for *Sex and the City*, well ... there it is.

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Shopping for big-ticket items is seen as a lifestyle statement. Going on customized cruise vacations (*not* with the janata, please, and never on one of those dreadful Lakshadweep cheap deals) and acquiring a farmhouse or a beachfront property of your own is another sign of having arrived. The older generation gets mini heart attacks when they discover how much their children are spending on 'unnecessary things'. It's hard to convince people for whom five zeroes on a cheque represent a milestone when they find out that those zeroes mean little to a twenty-something whose salary cheque comes with yet another zero. For that person to acquire a designer 'It' bag at well over a lakh of

rupees is no big deal. It's seen as an investment in the all-important 'image'! If a young man spends half the salary his father earned on a pair of Italian loafers, his dad may get a coronary, but for the son, it's a Sunday brunch statement, without which he feels lost. This new consumerism, which is seen as an addiction or affliction, depending on the perspective, is spreading like a virus, through the length and breadth of India.

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A young boy from distant Bihar came to seek employment in our home a few months ago. He was dressed like Salman Khan, in 'designer' jeans (cheap knock-offs), a body-hugging T-shirt, his feet shod in trainers with fluorescent laces, his hair carefully streaked and floppy, his earlobes studded with fake solitaires. I took it all in wordlessly—the blond forelocks covering one eye, the swagger and strut ... and I wondered what sort of 'work' I could give such a guy. While talking to me, he received a call on his mobile phone, which was encased in a colourful cover. The ring tone was a catchy film hit and he looked ready to audition for a Bollywood 'item number'. He was demanding a salary of Rs 4,000. He said he'd never attended school, was illiterate and wouldn't do any 'heavy' work! Now 4,000 rupees was what I had considered a pretty decent salary for myself after working as an editor for a couple of years. And here was this freako-punk asking me nonchalantly for this absurd remuneration. I was in a state of shock as I hastily got rid of him. Later, while discussing it with the family, I was told it was the going rate in the area for light work or 'top work' as it is quaintly known. Inflation

or lunacy? Or just plain progress?

'Money has little value these days,' another semi-literate domestic worker told me. He goes to five homes to cook meals. He earns Rs 25,000 to 30,000 a month. It is not enough, he complains, pointing out the exorbitant amounts he pays to tutors who coach his kids. 'They will not go from home to home cooking in hot kitchens, walking in the sun, barely having any time to eat themselves ... they will earn well in big jobs, go abroad, join a multinational company, get cars and decent houses.' These are achievable dreams. But just after that declaration, he came to me for a largish loan. He'd been diagnosed with stones in his gall bladder. He'd decided to go in for surgery. And not just with any old doctor. He'd got the best (with an FRCS degree, no less). 'Can't take a chance,' he explained, 'the sooner I get back on my feet, the better'.

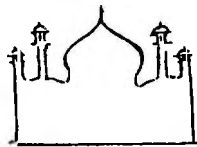
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It made me wonder whether those children would realize what their father gave up to give them a better life? Doubtful. It is a child's prerogative to take such sacrifices for granted. Rarely do they acknowledge or appreciate the effort. While watching *The Namesake*, I was struck by a line in the movie when a white American woman, who works as a librarian, reminds her Indian colleague, who's agonizing over her son acquiring an American girlfriend, that in America kids are on their own from the age of sixteen! They are expected to leave home and fend for themselves. Even if that's an exaggeration, it underpins the truth. **Parenting comes with a cut-off date in the West.** The paradox is that today's children have happily borrowed

the Western model of conduct (calling out to parents 'Hey you guys', as in the movie), but still want to hang on to the old perks: live at their parents' home till they get married (and even after), never offer to pay bills or share expenses, contribute very little in terms of emotional support, lead entirely independent lives socially, but expect all the standard facilities—food, laundry, transport. Indian parents resent this, since it is a one-way traffic with zero returns. A time will come when they too will turn around and ask for a rent-sharing arrangement or some sense of fairness in this lopsided relationship.

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Discussing money bluntly was not considered polite in India. It led to complications (avoidable) and bad blood (very avoidable). But young Indians are far more up-front about this, like their counterparts in the rest of the world. Going dutch on a date was not the done thing in my time. Today, I see everyone settle their bills separately in restaurants. Plastic strikes again! The biggest retail revolution is taking place riding on plastic ... making me smile nostalgically. Remember that line from *The Graduate* when a dumbstruck Dustin Hoffman is told by a pompous suit, 'The future, young man, is in plastic.' The future is finally here. And surprise, surprise—it is in plastic!



Mere Paas  
Ma Hai





Everything but everything in India can be traced back to that tiny two-letter word 'Ma'! It is the ultimate trump card, especially for a man. We are a nation of Mama's Boys, and we aren't embarrassed to say so. **Mén unabashedly love their mothers. And if Freud had a problem with that, well, that's his problem.** Regardless of state and age, our men unreservedly adore 'Mummyji'. I like that! At least they aren't pretending. Once they've declared Mummyji to be the undisputed heroine in their lives, all else falls into place.

Since the men don't always know that it's considered wimpish for a guy to go on and on about his mom in Western society, desi fellows un-self-consciously and sweetly fall into the 'Mummy knows best' trap. But it is not such a terrible thing ... really. If society the world over would accept this basic truth (men love their moms), nobody would pretend. Since the 'Ma' plays such a key role in our everyday lives, it's only fair that we examine this phenomenon. The great mother figure is the one single constant that has not been thrown out in the current cultural revolution. Nearly everything else has. The matriarch possesses such a terrifying hold over us that to deny her rightful position is to invite the wrath of the gods.

Asian societies are fairly kind to women of a certain vintage. It is yet another charming paradox. Once the woman crosses the all-important menopausal hurdle and her womb no longer produces those infernal eggs that cause most of society's problems, she is declared 'safe'. She stops threatening society with her sexuality. She can be 'managed'. That's when she's automatically elevated to a

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higher status and all but worshipped. She becomes the closest thing to living divinity. Foreigners travelling through India are often struck by this amazing upgradation, as they

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trundle through Rajasthan, marvelling at the way old crones rule their private fiefdoms. What they don't know (thank the Lord!) is that the same imperious women were bullied young girls once. And their lives were anything but admirable then.

I have monitored the transformation that takes place the moment a wife becomes a mother. Especially the mother of a son. She is instantly promoted and accorded a special position within her immediate community. She becomes a universal mother. And everyone addresses her as 'Ma' ... 'Munne ki Ma' or 'Bittu ki Ammi'.

Having only daughters is not the same thing. Anything but, as any Indian mother of baby girls will tell you. The first daughter may be tolerated (as opposed to welcomed),

but after her birth, any other female additions are regarded as liabilities. A daughter can never ever dream of boasting (as actor Shashi Kapoor famously did in his role in *Deewar*) '*Mere paas Ma hai*'. Because the relationship between a girl-child and her mother is so completely different from a boy's. A daughter never 'possesses' her mother, because a daughter is considered to be 'in transit'—like she's in a railway station's waiting room, ready to hop on to the train that will carry her to the real and final destination—the *sasural*, or husband's home. This successfully prevents mother and daughter from investing too heavily in each other. And yet, most mothers will confess if prodded that their ties are so much stronger with daughters. More than we are ready to admit.

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Funnily enough, the 'Ma' complex is not restricted to any one segment of our society. I've seen pompous industrialists behaving like whimpering puppies in their mothers' presence. And I've seen the reverence with which the sweepers in our building's compound treat old ailing mothers who arrive from the *gaon* often just to die in some ratty clinic in the slum nearby. But while they are in the sons' care, it is so touching to see the devotion and effort that goes into looking after them. To understand Indian society more thoroughly it is imperative to understand 'Mataji's' unique position.

When someone, even a total stranger, calls me 'Ma' at a traffic signal, my resistance breaks down instantly. I part with all the coins in my wallet and my eyes mist over. Similarly, when I meet any elderly lady with kind eyes, I

call her 'Ma' and frequently bend low to touch her feet. Maybe it's because I miss my own mother so terribly these days—more than I did when she passed away so many years ago. I miss having a mother to call my own. Someone to look out for me, someone I can love back equally. And to think I could have been a grandmother many times over by now had my children obliged! And yet, the emotional connect I feel with the sound that 'Ma' makes is enough to tear at my (tough) heart.

Will the next generation be equally attached? Equally sensitive? Doubtful. **From the 'Ma' generation to the 'Me' generation—one tiny letter of the alphabet, but what a sea change has taken place in under twenty years.** I was talking to both my younger daughters as we sipped tea and watched a spectacular sunset. They asked me why I always muttered a prayer when the sun sank out of sight and disappeared into the Arabian Sea, and what I said during those few seconds. I answered simply that I thanked God for the gift of another day well spent. I thought they'd laugh. But both of them were suddenly serious. They asked with some concern, 'But why thank God for the gift of a day ... there will be several more, even better ones ...' Will there, really? I teased. What guarantee is there this won't be my last one? They glared and Arundhati said sharply, 'Oh please, Ma, stop being such a drama queen.' I changed the subject and we talked about other, less depressing things. It was a relaxing and entirely satisfying way of spending a summer evening.

I don't recall a similar one with my own mother. Yes, we

often met over tea, but it was always understood that she'd serve the tea and I'd sip, while chatting lightly about family matters. She could never access my world as fully as I access my daughters'—we didn't speak the same language. The hierarchy was more structured and a certain level of formality indicated exactly where and how the line was drawn between informality and licence. We respected our respective boundaries and rarely transgressed them. It was the same equation between her and her mother—my tiny, sparrow-like grandmother, clad in a coarse, muddy-maroon, widow's nine-yard saree for most of her life (she was very young when her much older husband died of cholera). How and when did the transition take place between mothers and children in our society? How will this impact the future? I'm frankly bewildered ... we don't have a road map as of now. And without any signposts, we are slightly lost.

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I feel more like Cher's character in *Mermaid* than the stereotypical Bollywood 'Ma' à la Nirupa Roy, shedding copious tears over thirteen reels for no particular reason. We loved mothers who suffered for the sake of the family. We glorified mothers as martyrs sacrificing all at the altar of *parivaar*. **And when we saw that it wasn't happening in real life, we stayed with the idealized screen mother and refused to let the myth die.**

Till today, even the hip, cool, new, improved Bollywood mom still gives up her personal happiness for the sake of her (undeserving) children and husband. It is her duty (*kartavya*) to do so ... embrace deprivation and turn her

back on anything that's seen as being selfish. The 'me generation' laps up movies and TV shows that exaggeratedly focus on this absurd '*achchi* Ma' (there's no such thing as a '*boori* Ma' in our book). 'Ma' has to be the embodiment of all virtues. And God help the woman who refuses to conform to this construct. In other words—this is an SOS. Please, please, God—help me!

*Mangta hai, kya ... yeh bolo ...* I dared to ask this potentially explosive question of a twenty-one-year-old. She didn't miss a beat before answering, 'Money'. Was I surprised, disappointed, shocked? Not at all. I'd met an honest person. A global thinker! Isn't that what the young really, really want, no matter where they come from? It's such an open-ended wish-list. How much money will it take to make the twenty-one-year-old happy—really, really happy? Ummm ... errr ... LOTS! Well, thanks, honey. That's so to-the-point. Money has become a goal in itself, an end in itself. This is again something of a sea change in a country that had made (pseudo-) socialism into some sort of a religion. In my time, chasing money was looked down upon. If you were fortunate enough to be born with it, well, that was a different deal. But even then, you played it down. Quiet money scored over flash. In-your-face was indulged in by the nouveau riche trying to gatecrash into high society. Today, it doesn't matter what the colour of one's money is (black? white? *Sab chalega*), so long as there's a great deal of the stuff to throw around. Everybody wants a piece of the action.

**‘Bijness’ is sexy. India is hot. Why work for someone when you can work for yourself?** Those who toil away in order to qualify for entrance to India’s temples of higher learning, such as the Indian Institutes of Management or the Indian Institutes of Technology, are admired ... but also pitied. ‘God! Imagine slogging away for so many years,’ the Urban Lazies drawl, as they slouch around stylishly, planning their next vacation. Slog is a nasty four-letter word. ‘There has to be an easier option,’ they groan, getting a relaxing massage at a Himalayan spa. Frankly, there is! All you need is a great idea—and investors will happily throw big money in your direction. It has never been this easy to get ‘attractive’ money at interest rates that don’t kill. Banks chase you with lucrative loans. It’s only a mindset-problem that stops someone from taking advantage of the current boom. Borrowing was once considered an honourable person’s last and most desperate option (‘when all else fails—borrow’). Today, if you aren’t paying back some fat loan or the other, you don’t count. Money is easy to come by and only an idiot won’t take advantage. Urban Lazies underwrite virtually everything, depending on how adept they are at turning various monies around without the law catching up with them.

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A thirty-year-old entrepreneur looked at me like I was deranged when I expressed horror at his over-extended status. ‘As long as you keep the money rolling and don’t get caught, you’re doing great. Borrow from one source to pay the other—negotiate margins carefully—and you’re in business. There’s always another sucker to bail you out

in case you get stuck.'

He is absolutely right. He has managed to amass quite a neat fortune without investing a single buck. He has charm, a good family name and a certain languid approach to business which seems to work amazingly well! For men like him, Donald Trump and Richard Branson are role models, along with the Russian billionaire Sergey Brin with a hot wife who is a biochemist with an even hotter lifestyle. Azim Premji? Ratan Tata?

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Vijay Mallya? The 'King of GoodTimes'? Yeah ... oh yeah ... what a life! Mallya has emerged as the number one symbol of spectacular success. Youngsters frequently vote for him as their favourite icon. His larger-than-life image is further bolstered by smart positioning—he is the ultimate brand ambassador for his range of 'products'. A range that comprises India's first-ever 'five-star airline' to leading alcohol brands (Mallya is number three in the world of booze barons). But more than his business profile, it's Mallya's jaw-dropping personal style that attracts the youth—jumbo-sized solitaires in each earlobe, enough gold chains around his neck to give P. Diddy a complex and a yacht (*Indian Empress*) that's huge enough to host megaparties on its multiple decks.

There's the fleet of private jets, too. And grand residences in every glamorous destination in the world—from California and Monaco to Goa. Which wide-eyed, ambitious Indian youngster wouldn't want to be in Mallya's snakeskin shoes?

Austerity à la Narayanmurthy? No, thank you. Too



discreet. Flamboyance is in. That goes for the Ambanis as well. Given their more sober living (no booze, strictly vegetarian), and their workaholic reputation, the contrasts between their style and Mallya's are sharp and definitive. Never mind that in business terms and personal wealth ratios, there can be no comparison between them. The Ambanis, too, make the Indian Idols' list routinely. The innate brilliance of all three players is there for the world to see and admire. Anil Ambani isn't India's 'Marathon Man' for nothing. He runs. He has stamina. And he wins. Mukesh Ambani isn't the wealthiest Indian ever for nothing, either. He strategizes. He plans. He invests. He wins, too! It seems there are no losers in today's aggressive India. Isn't that splendid?

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The profile of the successful Indian businessman has changed dramatically. Compare the sartorial swish of a Sunil Mittal to the homespun appeal of the late G.D. Birla, and you'll get the picture. The earlier tycoons conformed to the political mood of the nation—they wore khadi kurtas and finely spun dhotis. They were insanely affluent even then, but looking at them, you could have mistaken them for modest grain merchants in a mandi.

The current-day Birlas come in different moulds. Yash Birla is *avant garde* in his attire, spiritual in his personal beliefs, and a trend-setter in his lifestyle. Kumarmangalam carries the old Birla tradition forward, but has replaced dhotis with charcoal-grey suits. Kumar is seen as the face of conservative business. He lives like a maharajah in a palatial home filled with priceless art. It is believed his

sculpture collection (which he inherited from his grandfather) is virtually priceless—no curator to date can put a value to it.

With so many billionaires crowding the field, the *aam janata* needs a new definition for the rich. It was enough in the old days to say, 'I am not a Tata or a Birla, you know ...' Everybody got the message. Somehow, I don't envisage anyone saying, 'I am not a K.P. Singh or a Sunil Mittal, you know ...' The Tata and Birla names were synonymous with wealth. Today's tycoons lack that mystique. Although, one does hear the occasional '*Kya samajhta hai ... I am not an Ambani.*' Sure, but the punch is missing. The Tata-Birla zing had converted the two brands into a generic category symbolizing wealth. Unimaginable wealth. But interestingly enough, today, billionaire status is more accessible. Nobody hoped to become a Birla forty years ago. You had to be born a Birla. Now, even that twenty-year-old entrepreneur running the Mumbai marathon next to Anil Ambani can match his speed and timing—on and off the road. Big difference.

If you think this is a Mumbai/Delhi phenomenon, you're wrong. I meet management students across India all the time (who inexplicably believe I have 'the answers' ... or maybe they just want to gawk). A lot of these kids are from small towns and have busted their butts to get in arduous mugging, all-night tutorials, fiercely competitive entrance exams ... the works. Often, their parents have sold land holdings, tractors, gold and other assets to make this happen. Do you think the children factor this in when

they push off to Pune/Delhi/Kolkata/Ahmedabad? Not a chance. They have their beady eyes on the next big thing—a ticket to the good life, with these strenuous courses seen as stop-gap years. The very fact that they're in indicates their IQ and ambition. It is tough, very tough to make the cut, given the numbers (around 200,000 students compete for the 1,200 general seats in the IIMs). Their predecessors, who believed sweetly in 'nation-building', were brilliant pioneers who really and truly contributed to today's aggressive, confident India—but got very little in return. Their children and grandchildren no longer share the same dream. Sure, a lot of ABCDs (American-Born Confused Desis) are coming home now that they think they'll be able to live in the style they've been accustomed to in ... oh, even Ohio.

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What's your motive?

But their motivations are different. They are in India simply because India today is offering them a far better deal than the one they've worked their asses off to 'enjoy' overseas. The prodigals get paid the sort of salaries their grandpops' eyes would've widened at. They have far more comfortable homes to live in (especially if they are from the IT sector), staff to look after their babies and meals, keep the house clean, drive saab, memsaab and bachchas around, plus, the unbeatable high of being in one's comfort zone. Definitely a big issue in a world where for all the big talk of multi-

culturalism and the absorbing of diversity, colour remains an ongoing issue. To be labelled a 'Brownie' in Britain or a 'Person of Colour' in the USA cannot be fun, for all the other advantages of living there. Back in India, the one issue that doesn't have to be addressed is the colour of the skin. No wonder so many families are relocating. What is amazing is the speed at which they put down roots and get on with their lives, even if they've never ever lived in India, and are second-/third-generation immigrants in the

countries they've uprooted themselves from. 'Home' is still India, in their hearts and minds.

Poverty angers  
most Indians. We  
are upset when  
we are reminded  
of an old blight

In reality, that 'home' is generally a Bollywood film. But so what? India is embracing the 'returnees'

with open arms. I meet them frequently and suppress a smile at their strange accents (Eddie Murphy meets Al Pacino meets Peter Sellers meets Dharmendra) and the sincere efforts to go desi overnight. Cho chweet, as they say in film mags. Money no longer weighs on our conscience. Money is not evil. Money does not corrupt. Money is yummy. Even our gods agree! Going by the staggeringly wealthy temple trusts, it is obvious the gods themselves have sanctioned excess and freed us from *purana* guilts. This is so liberating, especially for my in-between generation, caught crazily in the big debate (austerity vs ostentation). While I still lack my children's clear thinking

vis-à-vis lolly, I'm beginning to relax ... just a little. My wallet bulges with a stack of credit cards, but I use just one. Afraid that if I go all out with the others, I'll end up in ... you've guessed it ... debt.

And, of course, nothing can be more shameful than being a debtor. My father's voice comes back to me each time I find myself buying 'unnecessary' things. My children have no such issues. Their friends share the attitude, which, I'm repeatedly told, is perfectly OK to have in the first place. 'The whole world thinks so,' I'm witheringly reminded if I dare to question them. Honestly speaking, I don't get it ... never will. At one level, it scares me to think money has been stripped of its mystique and therefore its value. It's become notional. Worse, it has become pedestrian: Hundreds, lakhs, crores, billions .... who's counting? The only philosophy that rules is, '*Paisa vasool*'.

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Value for money. Are you getting the biggest bang for your buck? No? Go sue. Okay, we are a few years off from the 'go sue' mantra that keeps America on its toes, but it's going to come. Getting damages (hard cash, brother!) after going to court and relentlessly pursuing prey is seen as a total waste of time here, since the backlog in virtually any court in India will take twenty years (conservative estimate) to clear. It's a mug's game, and everybody knows as much.

Love-shove, pyaar-vyaar

We have devalued the power of money, and I'm not sure

whether that's democratic, or plain 'capitalist pig'. Money spelt romance in the old days. A good-looking desi girl generally married for money—and it was considered a romantic decision ('How can my daughter be happy with a poor man? *Love-shove* is okay, ji. But a girl needs security first ... *pyaar-vyaar* automatically follows. Where's the problem?'). This was largely true. A moneyed man was respected, and he exuded a certain aura. People talked about the number of cows he possessed. Or the number of cars. He was judged by the staff around him. '*Kitne khansamey the?*' Gabbar Singh could've asked, with awe in his growl. The village headman could never be a pauper. Urban communities, too, always made reverential references to someone coming from a wealthy *zamindari* in the back of beyond.

Old money scored over new. Snobs sniffed at the 'quick-buck Murugans', especially those who left India to mint dirhams in the desert. 'Gulfies,' we'd say dismissively, of the flash-and-cash types in shiny polyester. But even those cartoons would get the best-looking virgins from their 'native place' as brides. It was enough to know a guy was loaded. Better him than some broke bloke with bad breath to boot. The colour of money is no longer an issue—you've got it, flaunt it. Dirhams, dollars, euros or yen. No problem. Besides, everybody has money these days—God knows where it's coming from. And nobody cares about all these annoying statistics. Poverty line? Ooh ... is that what Sabya's latest collect at FashionWeek is called? Kewl. Farmers dying in Vidharba? Come on, girls, let's host a

Charity Auction. Call that Princess of Kadkaland as patron. Champagne on the house. Dress code, minimal. Must do something for these poor guys, *yaar*.

**Poverty no longer registers. In fact, poverty angers most Indians. We are upset when we are reminded of an old blight.** It's really a nuisance to be told the India story isn't all that rosy, after all. In the present rah-rah scenario, we want rainbows and butterflies on our mental screensavers. Not begging bowls and emaciated bodies. We're done with that image. Done, done, done. Take it away. Banish it. Oh please ... not that *ghasa-peeta* rubbish again. Young India is going great guns ... nobody can spoil the party. One can sense the euphoria, feel the excitement. India is on a roll, brother. Don't be a bloody spoilsport and talk about farmers' deaths and stuff like that. People die, man ... people die. But the point is: *you* can get a life.

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Sure.

In such a scenario, it's cruel to burst the bubble. Who needs a reality check? Look at those hearty farmers from the Punjab. They look like Akshay Kumar and are equally hip. **They may not have gone to a swish public school, nor seen the insides of a college, but hey—are they hot!** Go to any nightclub in Delhi on a Friday night, and you'll see these guys, outfitted in the latest D&G gear, with their chicks in Versace, top to toe. They come carrying bags filled with currency. It's their 'pocket money' for a night on the town. They place that bag on the bar counter and instruct the barman to keep pouring till the money runs

out. There's a lot of 'liquidity' in that plastic bag!

The guys ask the bartender, 'Which is your most expensive whisky?' He loves, no, adores, such chimps. He mentions an indecently-priced single malt. 'Very rare, sir,' he says, turning the bottle round and round. 'Double pegs, yaar,' the guys order. 'And ... don't forget the Pepsi and ice.' The bartender winces visibly, as he adds a cola to the priceless malt and piles on the ice cubes. The farmer is immensely chuffed as he yells, 'Cheers, *Pappe*,' and knocks it down in one gulp. The evening has just begun. 'Royal Salute' is next. It's actually the cola he loves. **So what? Have money. Will waste.**

194 'Value?' What's that? Rich India laughs at the suggestion. 'Our grandfathers had to worry about such things ... to prepare for famine, drought, epidemics or war. We have no such problems. Modern methods, technology ... what are they there for if we can't use them? Our forefathers were insecure ... some of them were refugees. But we aren't in that boat. India rocks, man. It's a rocking country. Are you going to the Shakira concert? *Kya hips hai!*' Shakira's hips don't lie. And our lips don't lie either! Today, we are daring to articulate passions our grandparents never did ... never could. If I'd told my grandmother that a ticket to Shakira's gig in Mumbai was as high as 3,200 bucks, and that it was a sold-out performance, with countless teenagers grooving to the Latina sex goddess's tracks, she would have slapped me lightly, tapped my wrist and said, '*Kaaye? Hatt!*' in a voice that suggested complete disbelief. So would my mother, who'd run the house for around that much



cash per month. But we had fun. And I'm not talking about a situation a hundred years ago. Has so much really changed in forty years? You bet!

Another thing: As a teenager, always strapped for those extra twenty bucks (come on, teenagers have special needs!), I had to apply (virtually in triplicate!), well in advance, if I was to get my hot little hands on that extra cash! But under no circumstances could I help myself to the money, even if it was lying under my nose. I never opened my parents' cupboards or dug into a wallet lying on a shelf. I knew where the emergency funds were, but there was no question of touching those notes, even if I had my own kind of emergency. It's different with my own kids. They blithely open my handbag and 'borrow' whenever they feel like it. Of course, I'm kept in the loop and informed about the missing notes. But that's another story. They don't wait for me to sanction these borrowings—small amounts, generally (and mercifully). But it's the attitude.

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Am I to blame for this laxity? I guess so. Maybe I'm too lazy to abandon my writing to go dig for a couple of hundreds ... maybe I don't really care if a few notes are missing. See? Despite my upbringing, I too have succumbed. My attitude to money has undergone a radical transformation. I see it as a functional tool, not an end in itself. **My cardiac functioning is more important to me than tracking missing currency.** I am far more casual about expenditure these days, and feel I have no right to keep lecturing my kids since my own lifestyle is

not exactly Gandhian. I splurge ... I indulge. At times, I die of old guilt (Damn! Conditioning raises its ugly head!). At other times, I tell myself smugly, I've earned the right. I work like a dog. I pay my own bills. So who's there to tell me what I should do with my earnings? The old mantra (save, save, save) which defined our society, has been replaced by a new one—spend, spend, spend. I am no angel, no exception. I figure, this is my life ... if I don't enjoy the fruits of my labour now, then when? This is a common refrain. Who am I fooling? Me!

196

**Check out travel sites and you'll see the record number of Indian tourists haring off to exotic destinations—Brazil, Norway, Argentina ... the farther, the better.** I have been on a few luxury cruises myself, and can't wait to grab another. Do I tear my hair out contemplating a grim future? Do I spend sleepless nights thinking I'll be in dire straits at eighty-plus, if I don't put away every extra rupee right now? Hell, no! I've become an American in this regard ... that too, without social security to fall back on. Chill, I say to myself, during rare anxiety attacks. You are not your mother. You are doing okay. You have enough.

'Enough' is a dangerous word, though. Who defines 'enough'? Relative and open to interpretation ... that's 'enough'. Well, in my book, enough is enough. I will not stress myself out tabulating its exact worth. I've become philosophical and fatalistic (like Americans?). And I feel so much better about myself. It was a conscious decision, taken after much internal debate. Am I doing the right

thing? Heck, who knows? **But there's a certain challenge, I've discovered, in letting go of remembered neuroses.** It's no longer about how I should feel—it is what I *do* feel. Huge difference. I remember talking to film-maker Mahesh Bhatt many years ago. Sensing my nervousness about a project, he said, 'We spend too much of our time during our most productive years saving for the future, saving for our old age, saving to provide a better life to our children ... by the time we make good money, we are too old to enjoy it. So ... in effect, we slave all our lives to enrich the next generation.' Made perfect sense to me.

In a way it freed me. The obsession with 'saving for a rainy day' persists with some Indians despite the new urge to splurge. Many of us secretly continue to hoard. Much of our advertising is based on this psychological premise. We spend our adult life preparing for some undefined disaster that awaits us in the not-so-distant future. **We are perpetually preparing for doomsday. We behave like there's no good news ever. The day we make money, we start fearing we'll lose it. This sometimes makes us stingy and small-minded.**

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Of course, we tell ourselves we are anything but Uncle Scrooge's distant cousins. In our eyes, we want to believe we are generous and large-hearted. 'Look at those Americans ... forever counting their precious dollars ... forever converting currency.' And yet, Indians behave in the oddest way when they go to America themselves. Even the wealthiest Indians develop a strange complex and hang

on to those greenbacks like someone will snatch them away. It's a little less pronounced, now that we all carry wads of plastic in our wallets. Besides, the dollar itself is in the doldrums. The Indian rupee is crawling up—slowly but surely. But the fear of some financial calamity hitting us is omnipresent.

198 We pass on this paranoia to our children. They don't get it. Like their yankee counterparts, they believe in conspicuous consumption—and wastage. Go to any shopping mall or multiplex theatre, and you'll see overweight kids walking around stuffing their faces with junk food—most of which lands up in the garbage. If we grew up getting the maximum mileage out of our clothes (we had to hang onto them till they fell apart), today's kids follow the wear-and-chuck pattern. Nobody wants to be seen in last season's jeans. And there's no use arguing that denims are denims and how different can one pair look from the next? ('Ma ... don't you ever see the important details—like the pockets?') If we lecture to the next generation that we are doing all this for them—scrimping, saving, planning—they laugh: 'Keep it up.' But they don't appreciate it. (Isn't this an age-old wail? I can't bear to repeat it—but here I am, doing just that!)

Middle-class parents start planning for their children's future from year dot. The savings mania is thus justified. 'Munna must become a big man ... not remain a clerk like me,' say glum fathers, who in turn blame their own fathers for not saving enough. 'Had my father planned his life better, I could have gone abroad ... and become someone!' this

lot says bitterly. Never mind the fact that the father may have sold a tractor to send his duffer to a good school—a really good school—but in India.

**Perhaps it's in our genes to feel it's Apocalypse now.** We all live with that sneaking feeling 'The End is Near'. But instead of making us fatalistic, this fear turns us into misers. We laugh and say knowingly, 'Of course we can't take it all with us ... but it's better to be prepared for the worst.' This worst-case scenario paralyzes our joyous moments. But despite that awareness, we are total duds when it comes to disaster management. We give up. We surrender. Which is why those poor farmers hang themselves, weighed down by debts that appear so tragically small to others. They can't deal with the shame or loss of face. Because 'debt' itself invokes a deep-seated feeling of dread. Debt and dread go hand in hand.

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But developed nations live on debt. The so-called mature economies think nothing of borrowing heavily and forgetting to pay back. Taking loans is considered a healthy part of doing business. Sometimes, the trick backfires, but most times, a Big Bully using a Big Stick (guess who?) can extract big bucks out of a smaller country like Mexico.

At a meet on globalization in New Delhi, Professor Joseph Stiglitz, a Nobel laureate (economics), provided a startling perspective on how heavily America borrows from 'underdeveloped' nations that end up subsidizing all those impressive plans that frequently stall other, equally impressive, ones in far-flung countries because the money has run out. Money never seems to reach those who need

it the most—on both a macro and micro level.

It's the same story in nearly every state in India when monies earmarked for vital developmental projects do the disappearing act with such regularity, nobody's really surprised. Earthquake relief, floods, epidemics, drought, terrorist attacks, communal violence—there's no shortage of disasters here. No shortage of funds either. But nobody ever seems to see the colour of that money. During national emergencies, in particular, everyone gets in on the act—from corporate biggies to snout-nosed schoolkids. Relief operations are launched on a massive scale. One can spot well-meaning citizens pinning flags on strangers in return for a donation—anything from a few coins to larger notes is welcome. Students feel involved, important and patriotic for those few short months, as they go from door to door asking for money, clothes, medicines for, say, the Prime Minister's Relief Fund. Newspapers carry stories and images of sacrifice and generosity; movie stars and cricketers join in, too. Everybody is caught up in a nationalistic frenzy—food-grains, clothes, cash pile up in rat-infested godowns. Months, sometimes, years, later, a nosy reporter chances upon the rotting goods and a few red-faced 'saviours' provide weak explanations. There it ends. Oh—the money is rarely traced. And nobody asks.

Strange, how heartless we can be and have been during calamities. **Generous and giving on one hand, cruel and avaricious on the other.** Nobody is spared, not even corpses. I really don't know of any other country (Venezuela? Brazil? Turkey? Are you listening?) where

scavengers rush to strip dead bodies of whatever there is—ornaments, cash, anything of even the smallest value, sometimes before the body is cold. I've heard of villagers scampering to mutilate bodies of air-crash victims before the arrival of fire brigades, often tearing earrings and rings of a person who may still be alive, or chopping off hands to get to the gold bangles around the wrists. One cannot say it's dire poverty alone that makes people behave in such a barbaric fashion. It is something far graver, and one can see it in the gory mythological stories that detail similar gruesome acts committed by vindictive gods, sadistic demons, thwarted lovers, rejected sons, desperate wives. Nobody thinks twice before launching a grisly attack on innocents. We not only endorse but condone whatever we believe can be easily justified. There are accounts of boiling oil poured into eye sockets to extract confessions, of rival kings being hacked limb from limb, infants being flung to their deaths or beheaded in the presence of their weeping mothers. Mel Gibson should read our history books for fresh inspiration!

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I find it strange that our notions of 'self' are so far from the horrible truth. We think of ourselves as peace-loving, God-fearing, docile people, who've been put upon by marauding invaders. **We believe we are essentially calm, spiritual, evolved, superior, patient and wise. But none of these is true.** There is nothing to suggest we are any more 'spiritual' than the next person. Hot-tempered and shockingly ill-mannered, we are amongst the world's most accomplished rip-off artistes. An Indian mob out to

lynch someone can compete with Idi Amin's henchmen.

Watch scenes of rioting in any corner of the country (oh, come on, all you have to do is switch on your TV set at prime time any day, every day). See the expression in the eyes of the rioters? Those murderous mobs are not unemployed, disenfranchised, desperately poor slum-dwellers venting their frustration. Often, they are office-goers on their way home when they get caught up in a 'situation'! Once they're in it, they turn into blood-thirsty animals as they pick up the nearest stone to hurl at random—never mind if it strikes and blinds an innocent bystander. The same people set alight public transport, private cars, shops and residences. An inexplicable madness takes over as they rush from locality to locality, burning and killing strangers without qualm.

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**I have met these people. In Gujarat. Right after the Godhra tragedy.** I have talked to them at length, trying hard to figure out what drives them to commit such heinous crimes. The people I spoke to were educated professionals—mainly chartered accountants, doctors and engineers. They were there with their wives and children, dressed in shiny suits, eating rich food from heavy thalis. There was not a trace of shame in their eyes as they tried to convert me. 'You don't live here ... how would you understand what we've had to put up with for so many years ... centuries? Now, we've had enough. Those people must be taught a lesson ...' Seeing me distraught and speechless, they exchanged looks and laughed, 'Madam, you will go back to Mumbai ... but we have to stay here ...



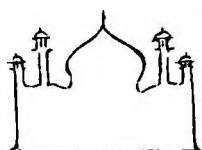
with them. Unless we chase them out, we will be dead ourselves. It's simple—either we kill them or they kill us. There's no other solution.' The men continued to eat jalebis, while the women nodded in agreement and fingered their flashy jewellery. 'Our wives and children are not safe with them around. It is better this way—once and for all, the matter will be settled and they will leave us in peace.' But where would all those thousands of displaced Muslims go? 'Pakistan,' came the chorus, followed by a wicked chuckle.

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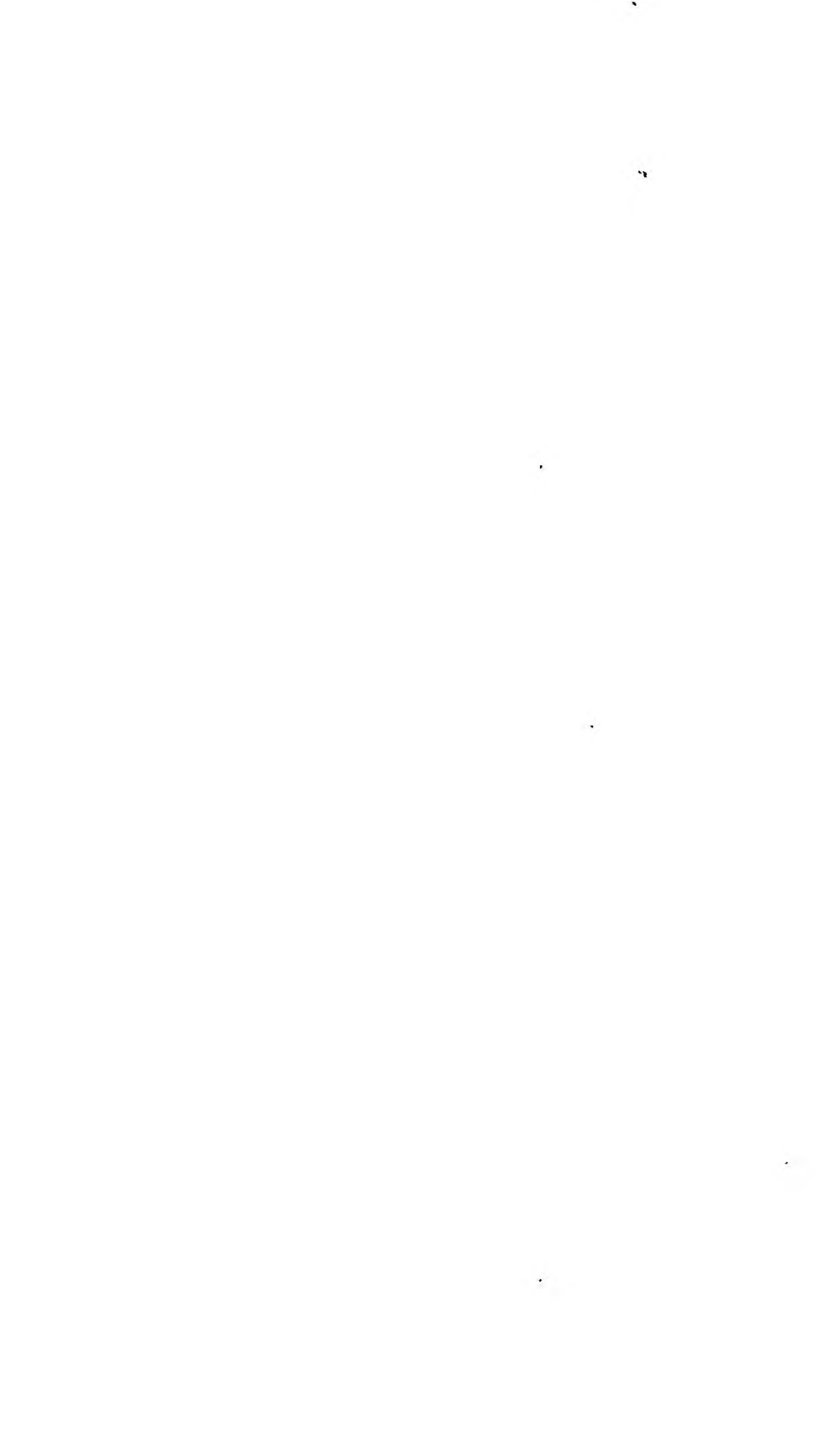
**Sigmund Freud spent a lifetime wondering what women want, and came up with a blank.** Most sociologists feel ditto when it comes to providing an answer to another zillion-dollar question: What do Indians really want? The obvious answers are 'Freedom', 'Democracy', 'Money', 'Education'. All these sound boring as hell, plus, I wonder if those are really what today's Indian wants. 'Money' is by far the unchallenged numero uno requirement, but the other three have little meaning, since they're a given. An old friend raising a twenty-year-old daughter came to see me the other day. He mentioned how our generation were told we'd have to wait patiently for rewards ... whatever those would turn out to be. Work hard for the exams. Slog away, swot, swot, swot. Compete like crazy. Await results. Phew! First class in hand, work some more. Swot some more. Apply for a 'decent' job.

Keep your fingers crossed. Land the job. Continue slaving. Wait for promotion. Keep slogging. Spend fifteen years or more in the same job. Get bored. Get restless. Marry sometime in between. Produce children. Hang in there. Grow middle-aged. Grow a paunch. Lose hair. Lose patience. Lose temper. Give up! End of story. End of life.

But that's not how it works today. Kids want it all. And they want it *now*. And they don't all want to work that hard, either. It's about having 'chill time', 'personal time', a 'life plan' that includes frequent holidays. Kids want to 'hang'. And they want to 'connect'. Mainly over the Net. No personal contact—or very little. No emotional investment. Or very little. Just lots of stimulation and virtual relationships that include virtual gifts (\$1 for a pair of sexy thongs) on Facebook. Thrilling, or wot?



On the  
Face  
of It



I was with my daughter Arundhati, asking her to take me through 'Facebook', the craze of the moment amongst the young. She was hesitant, but not completely hostile. Good sign. 'It used to be very exclusive ... by invitation only ... but now, everyone's on it,' she ventured. That's when I discovered the one-dollar thong. 'You mean you pay forty-five rupees to send a tiny image of a gift to someone?' 'That's the plan,' she answered cheerfully.

As I scrolled down, staring hungrily at images of her friends having the best time in Miami/Acapulco/New York/Rio during their spring break, I found myself blinking hard. These were young, hip, intelligent, affluent Indian students studying at some of the top B-schools in America. They kept their grades up, even while letting their hair down on weekends. They had their priorities figured out and were all set to take on the world. Some of the girlfriends had boyfriends, but many galpals were determinedly single and making the most of the opportunities their parents had provided. They had 'adapted' wonderfully well, as I could see in the party pics. The revellers were out of a Benetton ad—all colours and shapes. It was a 'we are the world' kind of Kodak moment. I found myself feeling left out. That could've been me! I whined. It's forty years too

late! And I thought of the options ahead for all those happy kids, living it up in far corners of the world ... sharing their lives so generously (and instantly!) with friends and strangers across the globe. They'd all be back in a year or two. And they'd all 'adjust' once more—like well-greased springs.

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In fact, one of the albums on 'Facebook' featured a traditional *nikaah*. The young bride-to-be is amongst my daughter's oldest friends. I'd watched her blossom into an international girl-about-town, thanks to her parents who'd encouraged her to discover her potential, explore life, live it to the hilt. And here she was—coy, demure, ultra-traditional—ready to marry a man picked by her doting mother and father. The lovely photographs said it all. She looked ecstatic, dressed in a conservative *lehenga*. Her husband-to-be looked impressive—neatly-trimmed beard, headgear, long jacket—exactly the same clothes as his father and grandfather had worn to their own weddings, and were sporting on this occasion all over again. The same girl had also posted other pictures of herself, dancing at various trendy clubs, sunbathing in Jamaica, clad in an alluring bikini. There were no contradictions in those dramatically different images, although it was hard to believe they featured the same girl. And yet, for anyone looking for a split personality, or evidence of hypocrisy—sorry—you're wrong. Both aspects of her life are valid and sincerely lived. Strip away the lycra swimwear or the elaborate lehenga, and you'd find a well-balanced, modern woman, aware of her many roles and not being forced to

sacrifice one for the other. 'Facebook' was what I needed to get all the images to merge and make perfect sense. Silently, I blessed her progressive parents who'd been far-sighted enough to offer their daughters the kind of exposure they could not have dreamed of for themselves.

**In their own way, the parents had prepared their girls for this very day, when they could slip effortlessly into the new world order, without compromising on old-world values.**

It is these young people who make me feel less cynical about our politicians' misadventures. The hope is this generation will see through the games and manipulation of those wily, old rascals and refuse to play ball.

That same night, while watching the news on TV, I came across a heated (and meaningless) spat between the spokesmen of two leading political parties. An 'anti-Muslim' ad campaign was being questioned by an aggressive anchor. The veteran spokesmen had come fully prepared to slug it out. This was a run-up to the elections in Uttar Pradesh. Much was at stake. The communal card was being played adopting the usual sly strategies. And I thought of the nikaah album and whether any of this would impact with nastiness on the lives of the couple in the picture. Would they feel victimized/threatened/targeted/marginalized/enraged by persecution? Or would they take it in their stride, refuse to be affected and get on with their lives instead? My guess is they'd take the second route. The day young Muslims in India decide not to fall prey to false propaganda or play footsie with devious, devilish politicians,

they'll finally free themselves and do what everyone does when the dirty tricks department goes into overdrive—resist, fight back and win. Education is the only weapon needed. And the message has finally gone home. Teach tolerance, not hate, and see the difference. But will our political bosses ever consider it a priority? Not on your life. **It suits everybody to keep the minorities illiterate and insecure. That's the bitter truth. Hate creates vote banks. Tolerance doesn't. It's that simple.**

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210 The heat is on in Uttar Pradesh and Mayawati is holding the hottest iron. There isn't much of a choice, is there? It's she or it's Mulayam Singh and his merry men. Who Mayawati finally chooses to bed (politically, that is) will decide the fate of that crazy state. And our own, of course. When UP votes, India quakes. UP decides the fate of the country, so, in a way, we need to hold our collective breath and keep all those twenty billion fingers and toes crossed that all goes well. India's Big White Hope (Rahul Gandhi) has been trying hard to slip into Daddy-o's shoes. So far, the lad has only managed to get his into his mouth.

He has talked about the 'Division of Pakistan' (oops!) and how his dad would have ensured nobody touched the Babri Masjid (ooops, and ooops again). His more sensible sibling Priyanka (the one who should be in politics, but isn't) has rushed to her foot-in-mouth-disease-ridden



brother's defence by reminding us Rahul is no 'novice' in politics. Damn! He could have fooled us!

The situation is looking decidedly deadly, so deadly, in fact, that Ms Cape (Jayalalitha) has been inspired sufficiently to break through the Hindi barrier. For thirty years, this remarkably intelligent politician/battle-tank, has successfully tricked us into believing she 'don't Hindi'. It was an astute position to adopt down south, where 'Hindi' is a bad word. Understandably so, given that every north Indian witheringly dismisses all those who live south of the Vindhya's as 'Madrasis'. Jayalalitha won the hearts and votes of her hardcore followers by resolutely refusing to acknowledge the existence of the so-called 'national language' (heck—I don't accept Hindi as mine!), and sticking to English (she has a master's in English literature and don't you forget it, folks). Well, now that 'J' has decided to back 'M', her linguistic skills have suddenly come to the fore, as she gives fluent soundbytes in a lingo she claimed she didn't know. So much for language diplomacy!

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But what astonished me was the decision of a young, handsome, well-educated MNC type from Mumbai who decided to jump into the UP fray one fine day. Recently married, the man was very much a party animal from urban India, more comfortable in lounge bars than dusty bustees. And yet, he did it! Quit a high-salaried job selling detergents to become a *neta*. His young and attractive wife was totally baffled as she struggled to apprehend the immense changes that lay in store for them. Here was a man who had courted her à la Brad Pitt, following the standard trajectory, the

predictable route: flowers, choccies, wine and romantic dates, clad in Rock and Republic jeans (£539 at Selfridges). Now, he planned a radical shift by joining politics and taking his chances. Refused a Congress ticket, he'd opted for the Samajwadi Party ('Oh God!' moaned his well-heeled friends).

Oh, God, is right. Within weeks, he was out of sight. Lost in the heat haze of some obscure hamlet, sweating it out in Ralph Lauren tees, a generous supply of mineral water stashed at the back of his SUV. His puzzled wife was left holding the baby—literally. Their newborn had yet to cut his first tooth. The new mother naively believed her husband would be back to home and hearth after his little adventure. Wisely, she'd decided to retreat to a friend's luxury villa in the hills and wait it out. 'He'll be back ... he needed to get it out of his system. Politics is a *nasha*. I hope he loses.'

Well, for a greenhorn, he has shown guts. His wife may delude herself into thinking he'll become a 'suit' again, once he sheds his neta gear (and foolish notions). My feeling is that the guy isn't as stupid as he appears. Perhaps he looks at politics as the best career move of his life. Where would he have gone in the MNC pecking order? Climbed five rungs up in twenty years? Led a boring bourgeois life of complacency? Become a platinum card-holder? A frequent flier? A member of a good club? Playing golf on weekends? Taking two holidays abroad a year? Public school for sonny boy? Diamonds for the wife? A beachfront property in Goa? Hell, no . . . not for him. Even if he loses

this round, he'd have tasted blood, and man . . . that blood is sweet, indeed. He is in it for life—win or lose. There'll always be the next election . . . and the next.

He's young, ambitious, hungry. Give him six months and he'll have learnt the ropes and every trick in the book. By then, he'd have wormed his way into his political boss's inner circle and developed his own precious network of wheeler-dealers. He'd have access to money, made some, and realized its further potential. **There's gold in them plains . . . today's boys know as much.**

He must've figured he had a far better chance of accumulating serious assets and wealth by hanging on in politics. If his trusting wife couldn't see the bigger picture, tough luck. Soon, she'll be wondering where

She became Miss India at nineteen, and narrowly lost the international title when she candidly stated her life's ambition

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the new Merc has come from . . . or the fancy phone. She'll ask questions . . . she won't get straight answers. Then, she'll stop asking. And just enjoy the perks of being a politician's pampered (if neglected) wife. That's the scenario as I see it. Cynical? Yup. I'd love to be mistaken. I want to believe the hunk is in it for nobler reasons—that he genuinely cares. But I think I know better. He's in it for the big bucks. If he makes it, he'll be a crorepati in under two years. Even if he doesn't, they'll still get that SUV. So, who's the loser?

**The young Indian is confused. But not angry. Angry enough, that is.** Nobody reacts to atrocities any longer. One Jessica Lall murder investigation does not indicate change. By and large, there is widespread indifference in place of indignation. Naxalites kill and maim policemen at random. Mumbai city faces the unprecedented dread of power cuts during a long, hot summer, corrupt top cops battle charges of extortion, high court judges submit incriminatory letters damning colleagues, court cases drag on for decades and more, bribery charges rock various state governments, our cricket heroes fall from grace during the World Cup, the BCCI (the all-powerful cricket club) shrugs off responsibility, a high-profile murder of Pakistan's coach (Bob Woolmer) sends shivers across the globe . . . but what do our youngsters do? Grin foolishly on assorted TV shows and blabber on . . . their words sound hollow, and their expressions are—go on, admit it—seriously annoying.

While all sorts of monstrous goings-on rock the country, all of us, admittedly, are riveted to our chairs, lapping up every nauseating detail of a big, fat Bollywood wedding. Yes, our doe-eyed Aishwarya Rai married the kohl-eyed Abhishek Bachchan, and all we goggle-eyed idiots could do was hang on to every scrap of the spectacle thrown our way. Young India—and Old—loved every micro-second of it. Nobody questioned the obsessive nature of the coverage the wedding generated, relegating

all other news to page 13! Even the Virginia Tech mass murder took a back seat to the *shaadi*, despite the fact that a young Mumbai student, Minal Hiralal Panchal, and an IIT professor, G.V. Loganathan, were victims of the massacre. The deranged Cho's lethal rampage ought to have engaged the student community at large. But did it? 'Oh . . . poor Minal,' said the students, as they surfed channels hoping for a glimpse, instead, of the heavily bedecked Bachchan bahu.

While the Mumbai tamasha was on, I met Madhu Sapre (one of my favourite gals). She was on a short visit to the city from a smallish village in Italy, Riccione, where she lives with her husband of six years. Madhu is a unique creature. A self-made, self-taught success story that defies categorization. She became Miss India at nineteen, and narrowly lost the international title when she candidly stated her life's ambition—and no, it wasn't to emulate Mother Teresa. Madhu wanted to build several stadia in India, since she felt we neglected sports! Her honest and innocent reply cost her a big win. But she didn't let that get her down. Coming from a middle-class Maharashtrian background, she broke several rules when she posed in the buff for a running shoes ad with her then boyfriend, co-model Milind Soman. The court case went on forever, well after the shoe company had shut shop. She acted in a dreadful film called *Boom* and then disappeared from the scene after a cheerful 'Ciao' to it all.

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Over coffee and *khakras* at my dining table, we chatted about her life since her wedding (which I had attended).

Five kilos heavier than her former svelte self, Madhu continued to look ravishing at thirty-five. Today she leads the life of a suburban Italian contessa (but well-shod, not barefoot!). She works in her father-in-law's gelato company as a marketing director, while her thirty-two-year-old husband handles international sales. She zips around in a Porsche, and flies private jets on business trips. And yet, her heart beats for India, for Mumbai, for the life she left behind. 'My friends don't understand it,' she told me, 'but I miss the smell of Mumbai . . . the stink. People think I'm mad . . . but I really love my city, my country. I read, write and speak Italian . . . but I long to converse in Marathi and eat *puran poli*.' It wasn't an off-hand remark. I could tell from the plaintive tone in her throaty voice that she desperately missed home—missed India. And not even the Prada/Porsche lifestyle she currently enjoyed in Italy could make up for her deep sense of loss. I empathized with her entirely as she said, 'When people criticize India and say "It's so filthy, it's so dirty, nothing works . . . look at those beggars . . . the noise, the poverty", I feel so upset, so angry. Whatever it is, this is our country, and I want to give positive energy to it.'

Madhu is an original. She is a transparently open and honest person who, when she exclaims incredulously, 'My God! Look at me . . . look at where luck has taken me . . . who would have imagined I would become so famous one day?' there is no element of affectation in the words. Someone like Madhu makes such a credible ambassador for today's India. Looking at her, dressed in trendy jeans,

red peep-toe shoes, carrying a Louis Vuitton bag and wearing discreet but impressive diamonds, with a jewelled Chanel watch on her slim wrist, I thought Madhu could pass for an international movie star—every detail is impeccably in place. And yet, scratch the surface and you'll meet a Mumbai *mulgi*, rooted in her Shivaji Park life, longing to eat dal-bhaat with her fingers, and yet, equally comfortable cooking pasta for her Italian family—when she wants to. 'My mother-in-law cooks for us and sends packed dinners—she knows how hard we both work and that I'm too tired to go into the kitchen when we get home.' The pride in her Italian family is unmistakable. And I'm amused by the obvious irony of the situation—would she have found as understanding a mother-in-law in India had she stayed back?

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What goes up ...

We are waking up to so many new realities, almost on a daily basis. To many of my generation, the world as we knew it is spinning out of control. Nothing is as it once used to be. There are no constants. Adapt or perish, I advise my agitated friends, who tend to hit their foreheads in frustration and wonder where they've gone wrong.

A 'cool' (by his definition) dad phoned to moan about 'losing control' over his teenage children. 'They don't obey me . . . they don't listen to me . . . my daughter smokes, drinks and stays out late. My son wants us to accept his

girlfriend and have her live in with us over weekends. My wife has given up and blames me for it all. I feel powerless. And then, I reason, it's no use trying to assert myself. At least my son is bothering to tell me he's bringing his girlfriend home for the weekend. My parents made duplicate keys to my room and would frequently barge in without warning, just to catch me red-handed doing something they thought would be objectionable.'

His mixed-up feelings sounded familiar. I can clearly remember my own parents recoiling in horror at the sight of me puffing away on the balcony of our home during my college days. They didn't know that while my one-ciggie a day posturing was bad enough in their books, my friends were doing weed up to four or five joints a day. And their unsuspecting parents knew nothing.

**Dating? Good God! Nobody 'dated' back then. You met. You married.** Dating was an evil import (like much else that was remotely, potentially sexual). Good girls didn't date. They wed. Bad girls dated and got pregnant. Today, India is struggling to address the sensitive, tricky issue of sex education in schools. There have been debates and protests across the board regarding the 'need' for introducing such a topic. Most parents have registered 'shock' and said they don't want their kids to be exposed to that 'dirty' subject. They've said it will lead to moral degradation. Amazingly, these protests have also been voiced by some students themselves who claim to be embarrassed by such talk, especially in a mixed classroom. It's not just people in smaller towns that have recoiled. A



survey in Sin City Mumbai showed the level of resistance to the initiative. The kids were as vociferous as their prudish parents in rejecting the proposal. Paradoxically, when quizzed about the birds and bees—basics, actually—the youngsters either played dumb, or were ignorant about the facts of life. And I'm talking about teenagers, not primary schoolchildren.

Money is sexy.  
Nobody takes  
money for granted,  
certainly not the  
middle class

**'What is semen?' was one of the questions asked. Five, out of the ten quizzed, didn't know for sure.** 'Have you heard of AIDS?' got startling responses, most of them completely wrong. Similarly, 'How does a girl become pregnant?' was answered in ways that were terrifyingly ingenuous ('She swallows a man's saliva while kissing'). In such an environment, the phenomenon of young people living together, that too, in the same home as their parents, is nothing short of outrageous.

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And yet, other surveys conducted by hip, smart glossies tell an entirely different story. Pre-teens boast nonchalantly about their sexual adventures, claiming they've had multiple partners and attempted daring feats while tripping out on a cocktail of party drugs. Which is the representative picture? I'm confused myself. Sometimes, when I overhear my children chatting after a night out, I feel alarmed at the casual tone they employ for fresh couplings, break-ups,

make-ups, flirtations, making out in the loo, doing substance, smoking up . . . it seems like they've been partying with Paris Hilton, Kate Moss and Britney Spears all at once. Well, night life in Mumbai/Delhi is the closest India is coming to similar fun and games in Miami or St Tropez. It's all about *mobility and money*—the young urban desi has both. And more. There's attitude to match. And the chutzpah to pull it all off with panache.

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If I were to have told my father that a galpal of one of my kids was given a designer bag worth a lakh and a half by her boyfriend as a twenty-first birthday gift, he wouldn't have believed me. That amount far exceeds the money he'd put down for his very first flat in Dadar (the one we never moved into, thank God!). It was a big, no, *huge*, moment for him, when he proudly took us (south Mumbai snobs even then) to show off his acquisition. We were not impressed and were insensitive enough to say so. When I saw a movie called *Khosla ka Ghosla* recently, dealing with a similar scenario, I grinned at the memory! One lakh rupees seemed like a fortune then—I hadn't thought I'd ever see the five magical zeroes on a cheque myself! When I did receive my first, I actually danced with joy and kissed it, sheer disbelief taking over the moment. And here was a young lady whose equally young boyfriend had spent more than that on a birthday gift! Casually, at that. No big deal, he must have told himself. In another shocking incident, Avinash Patnaik, a twenty-two year-old young man from Rourkela, drove over two thousand kilometres to Mumbai. His mission? To settle scores with his girlfriend, a model

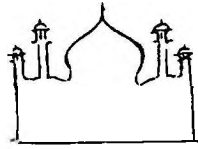
called Moon Das, who he believed was cheating on him after accepting a Valentine's Day gift of five lakhs! Well, Avinash is dead. So is Moon's mother. And an uncle. Avinash shot them, before shooting himself! Happy Valentine's Day, Moon!

It is a huge shift. In values as well as the overall cost of living. Money is *still idealized*. Money has not been demystified—wholly. Myths about money continue to dominate our fantasies. Money is sexy. Nobody takes money for granted, certainly not the middle class. Yes, there's much more of it around. And that leads to a certain disorientation, especially for the older generation. What has changed—is changing—is how the young look at money. They aren't as awestruck by it as my generation used to be. Money is still big in their books, but the reverence is missing. And money is hardly seen anymore. It doesn't change hands in its old traditional form. Plastic removes the romance from any transaction. Nobody deals with notes and coins. Even kids have plastic in their purses. Their grandparents don't get it—it's not *real* money to them. When these old folks see a wallet bulging with titanium cards they are curious but not impressed. They think of credit cards as being somewhat fraudulent. In a way, they're right.

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But people dealing in cash these days are mostly pimps and small-time merchants. The big fish who once dominated the parallel economy have switched to electronic scanning. 'Black money', which was the favourite topic right upto the '90s, has all but disappeared. Suitcases

filled with wads of notes are a relic of the non-electronic past. Which is a pity, really. Most Hindi film villains relied on them as important props. Hardly any blockbuster was complete without at least one dramatic 'suitcase' scene. Today, deals are done with a gentle tap of a computer key—no fuss. No drama. How boring! Money itself has been deconstructed and devalued, at least in my ancient eyes. *Mangta hai kya? Paisa ya pyaar?* The answer's obvious!



One Indra Nooyi  
Does Not a  
Revolution Make



Of course we're very proud of the successful Pepsi lady who has been winning accolades for breaking through the reinforced steel ceiling in the corporate *duniya*, because she heads one of the world's largest companies—Pepsico. Good on you, girl, I feel like saying, each time her picture appears of her accepting an award. India has rushed to claim her as 'one of our own'. We clasp her to our bosom and say, proudly, 'See . . . how well Indians are doing internationally? And that, too, a woman . . . *Wah!* India! *Wah!*'

No taking away from her achievement. Please give her some more awards; she richly deserves them. But while the hosanna hour is still on, let us remind ourselves that the story isn't all that amazing for women in the corporate world back home. The story isn't all that dismal either, but the fact that we incessantly need to parade our token 'women achievers' quite depresses me. We should take these achievements in our stride. The minute you create separate categories for successful women, you are already insulting womankind. There are counter-arguments in abundance, and determined feminists will point out the inspirational/aspirational value of holding up such role models. It's a little like that corny, misguided Ram Gopal

Verma film titled *Main Bhi Madhuri Dixit Banna Chahti Hoon* ('I, too, want to be Madhuri Dixit'). Today, the same film might work better if Madhuri's name was replaced by Indra's.

Nooyi was given a prestigious national award in 2007 (the Padma Bhushan). At a grand function, she received it from the prezzie, clad in a traditional south Indian Kanjeevaram saree. India was agog: Wow, we all said in unison, now here's a power lady worth emulating. She is smart, super-successful, powerful, wealthy . . . and . . . most importantly—so 'Indian'. She has not sold out. She retains her traditional values. She enjoys married life and raising children. Indra is perfect.

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**And so she may well be. But not every body can be an Indra or even want to be her.** In her several interviews, she sounds like a sensible professional who happens to be a woman of Indian origin. Although her halo tarnished just a little when she confessed her teenage daughter sends her e-mails requesting for an hour of her time! That's so un-Indian! She deals with those incontrovertible facts of life in a balanced manner, without drawing extra attention to, either. It is we in India who are dying to appropriate her and take indirect credit for her success. It is an old habit that refuses to go away. Spot a successful 'Indian' and promptly lay claim to him or her. We tried that with Sunita Williams. We did it with Kalpana Chawla. And so it goes . . . whether it's a Mira Nair, a Gurinder Chhadha, Night Shyamalan, Jeev Sethi, Anoushka Shankar or a Kiran Desai. We want to possess them and



thump our chests over each individual scalp acquired. I wonder if that's how it goes elsewhere . . . ?

Our ladies are doing very well—if you don't examine the numbers too closely. The minute one gets into uncomfortable demographics, the picture looks far less rosy. A majority of our women still bear the patriarchal burden, regardless of which strata of society they come from. The fight here is very different . . . it is not just about equal opportunities and equal pay. It is a fight that encompasses several centuries of cultural stereotyping. It's going to take at least another fifty years (and I'm being generous) for anything to change in a qualitative or radical way. Each time we kid ourselves into believing we've achieved something significant—a legislation here, a concession there—we start shouting about the triumph from the rooftops. And, of course, we promptly produce our few 'role models' as evidence of woman power. Indra being the latest to join the roster that routinely features the two Kirans, Bedi and Majumdar Shaw. The former, a top cop, and the latter a biocon czarina. With Mother Teresa dead and gone, the new crop of beauty queens is a bit lost. Who are they supposed to salute during the all-important question-and-answer rounds? Ten years ago, they didn't have to think before trotting out Mother T's name when asked to identify a role model. Today, they fumble a little as they wrack their brains to come up with a politically correct name. However, the media very considerably steps in by keeping a ready reckoner on hand. Sushmita Sen is frequently held up as an inspiration for having the guts to

be a single parent to her daughter Renée, for being 'open' about her countless romantic relationships. 'It takes guts,' say women, as they watch Sushmita gyrate to an old hit, *Mehboob Mere*. Yes, I suppose it does. But then, you have to first become a Sushmita Sen. And everything else follows.

It's a charmed life by any standards. Let's face it, how many women in the universe *become* Miss Universe at eighteen? And then go on to a superglam movie career with all its attractive, lucrative spin-offs? Sushmita Sen is like Maggi Noodles—she's different. But for a young girl aspiring to be her I'd say, 'Honey—trust your mirror. Do you look like a beauty queen? No? Then forget the Sush dream and focus on passing your FYC with decent grades.'

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That's the trouble with manufacturing icons. Unlike a Kiran Bedi, whose remarkable trajectory could (and does) inspire millions of teenagers across India, the ladies who are made of tinsel cannot really be held up as role models, mainly because they are born beautiful, stay beautiful and cash in on their God-given beauty. One can admire them worship them, lust after them, be jealous of them—but one can hardly *be* them.

India struggles to find worthy women worth looking up to. For years and years, the list remained stuck in a groove. Indira Gandhi, Maneka Gandhi, Sonia Gandhi, Priyanka Gandhi. And Mother T, of course. Briefly, P.T. Usha made the cut. Now Sania Mirza rules. Medha Patkar and Arundhati Roy are treated like yo-yos—too hot to handle for most list-makers. Shabana Azmi has her admirers, Mallika, too (not Sherawat, Sarabhai). But ever

since the whole construct of women in mud-coloured khadi struggling to establish their own identities lost its appeal, it's the showbiz ladies with impressive chests and near-perfect features who've grabbed the top spots.

It was fascinating to watch an episode of *Koffee with Karan* that featured Rakhi Sawant, the notorious 'item girl', who gyrated her way to the top of the cabaret girls' clique, before she won Indian hearts via a reality show titled *Bigg Boss*. Karan Johar's show stripped her of all her silicon-enhanced glamour and showed her the way she was—a plain-looking but immensely ballsy, lower-middle-class girl who'd decided to exploit her physical assets—and succeeded! In her own words, '*Jo dikhta hai, woh bikta hai*' ('It's what's on display that sells'). When she decided to brazen it out, critics fell over backwards criticizing Rakhi for being nothing better than a cheap sex-pot who shamelessly cashed in on her body. Considering Rakhi's modest background and her Maharashtrian roots, she was certainly hard to slot.

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**Then she hit the headlines because of an unscheduled kiss with a lout called Mika.** And there was no stopping her. I watched Rakhi's transformation into a 'pop idol' very closely, since it was a significant development in a country that demonstrates such mixed feelings towards non-conformists, especially when they are female. In fact, asked to write the lead article for a very chi chi publication, on India's '50 Power Ladies', I picked Rakhi as the symbol of true power. Self-made, self-taught, raw and unaffected, gutsy and undisguisedly herself. She

seemed far more 'today' than some of the privileged ladies on the list, like Indra Nooyi.

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Which is why women like Rakhi or Mayawati make such interesting character studies. They don't ask. They snatch at what they believe is theirs. But Rakhi is unlike Mayawati, who frequently behaves tyrannically. The latter's body language and personality signal the arrival of a ghastly new stereotype—the Honorary Male. By cloning the worst

aspects of male conduct, women like Mayawati end up in a strange, grey zone, which is confusing to both men and women. I feel like telling her to take a closer look at Ségolène Royal (regardless of the outcome of the 2007 elections in France). Here's a woman who is rewriting the rules, and doing so in style, without damaging her essential femininity (so cherished by the French!). The fact that she lost to Sarkozy is immaterial. The French claim to despise her these days, after months of gush. 'She was politically naive . . . foolish,' a Frenchman declared dismissively. Perhaps. But it would still have been interesting to watch her swim through shark-infested waters—in that famous bikini! Mayawati's personal positioning is a far cry from this model of leadership. Mayawati is competing with the Big Boys. She's taking on adversaries, who are no better than hoodlums, by mimicking their behaviour. As the leader of the Dalits, she controls a gigantic vote bank, and is likely to emerge as one of the most powerful politicians on the subcontinent. Whether we like it or not, whether we accept her or not, **Mayawati is the face of India's future. It isn't an attractive face—but it's an unforgettable one.** Mayawati for PM? Don't laugh. It's likely to happen sooner than we imagine.

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There are many Mayawatis waiting in the wings. It is as if they've been waiting for centuries for their time to come. Now that the moment has arrived—what next? Is India ready to confront its Mayawati moment? Not just yet.

Mayawati scares the hell out of India. And not only because of her reputation for biting people's heads off.

Mayawati is seriously threatening to a society that isn't comfortable with women in the first place. And I refuse to buy that bilge about India regarding its womenfolk as devis to be worshipped, etc. etc.

**The sad truth is that for a woman to find acceptance in our mind-bogglingly complex society, she has to be invisible.** If that's impossible, she has to be as close to being invisible as possible. She must be obedient, virtuous and quiet. If she has a voice, it must not be heard. If she has a brain, it must not be evident. If she has eyes, she must shut them without seeing what she isn't supposed to see. If she has ears—plug them. A (virtually) deaf, dumb and, blind woman had a far better chance of survival back then, and I'm ashamed to admit this, even today.

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Media may talk about the all-encompassing 'A-word' ('A' for Attitude), and write glowingly about how far it's taking contemporary women. I fear we are fooling ourselves. This is a part of our fantasy. We want to be Bridget Jones. But in reality we are one of Jane Austen's miserable plain sisters, desperately waiting for Darcy. I often overhear our versions of Carrie Bradshaw (*Sex and the City*) speak longingly, achingly about their lives, as they sip Cosmos in smart lounge bars. They're just not happening! I want to tell them not to waste their time. They look almost comical, clad in low-slung jeans that display sexy underwear, butt cleavage and saucy tattoos. Their feet, shod in summer sandals, move restlessly as they toss their 'relaxed' hair, stare longingly at other women's boyfriends and discuss

how their own lives suck!

Frustrated in the workplace, frustrated in their personal lives, frustrated at being frustrated, they crave for something elusive and out-of-their-grasp—independence within a secure relationship. It does not exist, I feel like shouting. It is still an either/or scenario. But I keep shut and think of my mother. I never got the chance to ask her whether she ever felt like breaking free. Or even if she missed ‘independence’.

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It was in such a frame of mind that I attended a simple wedding in Pune. The celebrations were on in full swing at a marriage hall in a crowded area on the outskirts of one of India’s fastest-growing cities. There were around 300 people present, friends, relatives, neighbours and colleagues of the couple. Nearly every woman I met at the function was a ‘working woman’ (hate the term. Show me one woman who does not ‘work’). Educated and articulate. Some were married, with children. They were the new middle class that India is so proud of. Under thirty, working, Double Income family. Disposable income. Annual holiday abroad (cruise, anyone?). Good clothes (branded, mostly). Good food (er . . . pizzas, McDonald’s and cans of colas). And what is loosely described as a ‘decent lifestyle’. I looked at their sweaty faces (the mercury was hitting 41°C that afternoon) and wondered whether they were happy. Is this the dream life they wanted to live?

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Lunch was served in another large hall that featured large painted signs in Marathi instructing people clearly: 'Clean Drinking Water Here.' 'Wash Basins.' 'Waste Material.' 'No outside eatables allowed.' Guests were helping themselves to strictly vegetarian food from a buffet table. Bratty children in shiny, synthetic 'outfits' noisily chased one another round the tables, while their proud parents beamed. I polished off three courses of rice preparations while nervous hosts sweetly offered mineral water only to my husband and me, as if we were from Kansas! It was all very simple, sincere and touching. On one level, I felt reassured that not much had changed since the time my own parents had celebrated their golden wedding anniversary (phew! Fifty years of togetherness? Some feat!) at a similar marriage hall. In fact, at the very one where they had got married! It still exists in Girgaum, one of Mumbai's oldest localities (a pucca Maharashtrian stronghold). The menu was practically identical to the original feast; even the guests looked the same, if I ignored the bratty kids in polyester outfits. But there was one important difference—the Pune bride was in charge this time. And so was her family. The young girl (well qualified and earning a whack) was doing the 'meet-and-greet' routine in a remarkably relaxed fashion. And I thought about my own mother at her fiftieth wedding anniversary, still taking her cues from her husband, and being deferential in the presence of her in-laws! After five decades!

As we left the venue and went into 'town', the more developed and modern part of this historic city, I looked



around keenly to try and see Pune through an outsider's critical eyes. I noticed an old cobbler (easily seventy-plus), sitting in the shade of a large peepul tree, waiting for someone to show up with a *chappal* that needed fixing. I thought about his earnings in today's day and age, where nearly everyone on earth has switched to wearing trainers! You hardly see the old Indian chappal or sandals in leather any more. What must the cobbler be fixing? Nikes and Adidas? N409

ot likely. Nothing happens to sturdy trainers (even those 200-rupee knock-offs from Taiwan).

The old man was dozing off in the unbearably dry Deccan

You hardly see the  
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Nike and Adidas?

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heat. Right behind him was a swanky spa (!). A beauty salon called 'Sweety's Parlour, for men and women, everything included, threading, waxing, bleaching' There was a tiny bar advertising Morgan's Spice Gold Rum. And a car showroom featuring Honda City cars in the gleaming, metallic colours of 2007. Another old man was busy hacking sugarcane (over five feet in length), while a vegetable-vendor dressed in a bright red nine-yard saree rested her head against an enormous basket of white radishes. There were watermelons for sale in a bullock-cart, mangoes shrivelling in straw baskets, a cycle tyres repair stall and a Nokia dealer advertising the latest in

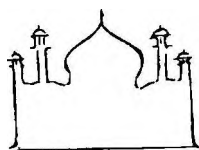
mobile phones. Suddenly, a sense of 'instant alienation' hit me. I realized I was reacting like a foreigner yet again. I was 'noticing' things that I ought to have taken for granted. Like at the charming wedding earlier. Like this scene, straight out of a German documentary film. Why was I studying these contradictory images in the first place?

236      Waiting at Pune airport for our flight back to Mumbai, I stared at my co-passengers. Most of them were foreigners with laptops. Pune is giving Bangalore a run for its money as an IT hub. After each visit to Pune, with its gleaming new IT buildings, I'd wonder at how rapidly this Peshwa city was changing. Even so, on that flight, I switched mental places with the lapped visitors, their skins angry, red and peeling (had they ever encountered such intense heat before?). They were dressed in blazers! Their misery got to me. Did they have the time to notice the cobbler by the roadside, as they rushed from the airport to their glass techno temples in air-conditioned cars? Did they see the irony of a spa right behind the dhoti-clad cobbler whose monthly earnings must not have matched a single seaweed treatment at the swish place meant for the lovely ladies of Pune? Did they avert their eyes rather than register the existence of the red-saree radish-seller as they downed beers in trendy hangouts incongruously called Soho?

I felt overwhelmed by a sense of protectiveness towards Pune. I felt like a fake Maharashtrian, almost an imposter. I guess a lot of us feel the same way when we go back to places that are supposed to represent our roots. It's an unsettling, disconcerting feeling.

*From Incredible to Unstoppable*

I touched the Japanese tattoo on my exposed right arm. I'd seen people staring at it with puzzled expressions at the wedding. They must've found it pretty weird. Suddenly, I found it pretty weird, too. What was I thinking? I drew the pallu of my turquoise-blue Chanderi saree over my right shoulder. Maybe I was hiding more than just my tattoo that evening?





Parde  
Peechhe<sup>Ke</sup>



*Parde Ke Peechhe*: The literal translation would be 'Behind the Curtain'. But it actually means much more than that. The veils, curtains, screens we hide behind in India (particularly those in our minds) are pretty sinister. I suppose every curtain has its country (or the other way around), but we are very fond of ours. Everywhere else in the world it may be considered rude for strangers to crowd behind a curtain and stare fixedly at a visitor. Not so in India. Go to any government office, or an unknown person's home and you'll *feel* dozens of eyes boring holes into you. We don't find this sort of behaviour odd or offensive. We love to stare, ourselves. Often, at nothing.

Try this experiment on any street in India. Stand in the middle of the road and gaze fixedly at the sky. Soon you'll be joined by a couple of idlers who won't necessarily ask what you're looking at. They'll mutely join you, craning their necks upward to follow your gaze. The logic being, 'If someone is staring, there must be *something* there . . .' Soon, the small group will start growing. From three persons, it'll grow to thirty. All of them peering heavenward at precisely nothing. If you stroll away nonchalantly from the scene, they'll trail you for a while, before dropping out. A 'starer' has his or her own status. It's assumed the person is

looking at something because there is something significant going on which may not be immediately visible to the others. Besides, we have all the time in the world to stop and stare.

Everybody stares at everybody else. No problem in that. No embarrassment. It is understood that no offence is meant. And none is taken. But outsiders get pretty spooked when they find themselves at the centre of this staring game. It's one Indian trait they'd rather go without. But I often ricochet on them (sometimes, just to be contrary) and say, 'Rather our staring than the no-eye-contact rules of New York and other places.' At one level, I believe what I say—the minute you look into another human being's eyes, something happens. A connection takes place. Not always with a happy outcome—but what the hell.

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When I'm in New York, I forget not to stare. Particularly in the subway or bus. I am an inquisitive person to begin with, hungry for the smallest, silliest detail. Bad news! I remember a beautiful black girl in a trendy Miami club walking up to me and saying aggressively, 'Whaddya starin' at? You have a problem, lady?' I shook my head vehemently and said, 'No problem ... I like your earrings.' She wasn't convinced, but let it go. Phew. That was a close call.

People find us hypocritical, too, as indeed we may be, but that's only a half-truth. Of course we are hypocritical about a lot of things and pretend to be far more virtuous, holier-than-thou, etc. etc. than we actually are. But that's true of nearly every society.



I remember losing it once in Germany, when I was asked (rich irony coming up—you're warned) by a snivelling German in the audience (this was at a book reading) about 'India's terrible caste system'. I nearly gagged on hearing it in such an incongruous setting. I let him have it 'right and left', as we say, by pointing out the absurdity of such a strong statement in a country that had exterminated millions in the name of 'cleansing' society. How could he ask me such a question! How dared he? Caste exists everywhere, it's just labelled differently. 'Caste' is 'class' in Britain. What else does one call the discrimination faced by Kate Middleton during her romance with Prince William? The poor girl was savaged by the press for being too 'middle-class'. She could've been a Dalit in Mayawati's UP dreaming big dreams of marrying her Brahmin boyfriend.

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Nearly every day one reads horror stories about young people stoned/lynched/killed/burnt for falling in love with someone they're not 'supposed' to fall in love with. **Yes—caste is a ghastly sore that festers and festers while civil society looks the other way.** It makes us uncomfortable. It makes us angry. It fills us with wretchedness and shame. We cannot believe caste is still an issue in India. I mean—caste! Who cares? A lot of people, apparently. Educated people, included. Young people, too. All these bright-eyed students who sail through impossibly competitive exams, rush abroad for higher education, come back to swank jobs in swank companies. And then advertise for a bride/groom of a

particular caste and sub-caste. The opposite is also true. As I found out for myself, chatting with a twenty-four-year-old engineer at his engagement ceremony. He'd met his future bride on the Internet. His requirement was simple and unambiguous. He was sick of living abroad and dating 'foreign chicks'. He 'met' his bride-to-be while chatting on a friendly site. She was desi, single and working with an international company. They flirted for four days—just four days—before he proposed marriage! He had not asked to see her photograph but had sent her his own. 'I decided to be candid and upfront about everything. I was overweight, I drank too much and I'd slept around quite a lot. In fact, I had a Jamaican girlfriend when I proposed. So what? I was ready to commit and settle down. You know why? My Internet girlfriend sounded so sincere and traditional. Despite the crazy time difference, she would wait up for me to get home, only to say a sweet "good night". I was touched.'

He took the first flight back to India, and met his love at the airport for the very first time. What do you know? She turned out to be attractive, smart and ready to take the plunge. Parents? They were 'handled', and showed up for the engagement, albeit without much enthusiasm. The guy sounded over the moon, the girl looked ecstatic. Caste? Forget it—compatibility is what these two opted for.

And yet, for every such example, there are so many others who still stick to notions of *varna*, like sugar syrup to jalebi. It angers and embarrasses me when otherwise trendy young people continue to endorse caste divisions,

whether in their private lives or when it comes to competing for entrance exams/jobs. The protests are half-hearted, as and when they break out. By and large, students are a bit apathetic, allowing themselves to be ruthlessly manipulated by politicians who capitalize on prejudice, while promising deliverance. I wonder what sort of a switch we need to galvanize the majority? We are constantly reminded of the fact that over 50 per cent of our one billion (and still growing) population is under thirty-five. They seem somewhat directionless and uninspired as they ungrudgingly chug along, allowing themselves to get co-opted into a system they ought to be vigorously fighting.

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Driving into Udaipur to attend a tony seminar in a fantasy-setting (the Lake Palace Hotel), I am struck by the startling contrasts en route from the airport to the hotel, a good forty-five minutes away. Yes, a new international air terminal is under construction, but as of now, the existing one is nothing if not primitive. The cops checking our e-tickets are clearly clueless as they stare uncomprehendingly at the print-outs. My daughter's paper has been misplaced, but nobody notices that the two of us have sailed in with a single ticket between us! And this is one of our 'most visited' tourist destinations, one that boasts of an unbroken line of erstwhile rulers going back 1,400 years. We could as well be in that era, for all the 'progress' in evidence. The highway is not as awful as the one in Agra, but the landscape is

dreary and daunting, despite the boasts of a local guide who points out a zinc smelting complex that he insists proudly is the 'second largest in the world'. Well, a fat lot of good that's done to this historic city of seven beautiful lakes. There's absolutely nothing in sight for as far as the eye can see but the jagged outlines of the Aravalli range ('earthquake-proof,' insist locals). I don't spot a single school building, forget a college, and the one hospital we are shown looks like a dump—I'd hate to fall sick in Udaipur.

246 And yet, the city attracts posh visitors from across the world who are 'charmed' by its rusticity. 'Time seems to have stopped here,' gushes an American lady in her eighties, as she squints up to take a better look at a crumbling palace, which serves 'High Tea' (if you please!), on a stone-paved terrace. I laugh to myself. If the old biddy only knew how close to the truth she was!

While sprawling luxury hotels are being built around the edges of the lake, young locals sit around listlessly, unsure of what to do next. To call the centre of the city shabby would be an understatement. It is off-season, and the mercury has already hit over 40°C, but one can see not much happens even during winter, when the hordes descend for a taste of 'exotic India' ('What, no camels? No elephants? No snakes? No maharajahs? Where are we, honey? Are you sure this is India, not Cambodia? Oh . . . that's our next stop, right?'). As we glide past in our wonderfully-restored 1948 Chrysler, all gleaming chrome and leather-upholstered seats, a few sleepy shopkeepers

look up without interest, before going back to their extended siestas. When I dare to interrupt their nap and ask to see some silver jewellery, they are visibly annoyed. It's as if they've stopped hoping or caring for custom.

The homes and shops in the centre of the city look in need of urgent repair. Open drains, overflowing gutters and uncleared garbage bins add to the overall gloom. The stench combines in an awful way with the oversweet fragrance of summer blossoms—madhumalini creepers, mogra bushes and frangipani. **The contrast is symbolic of the city where legends of valour abound among the squalor.** Young people live in the past, vicariously revelling in the glories of ancestors. They speak a strange sort of highly-accented English, with the emphasis on all the wrong syllables. When they talk half-longingly of visiting Mumbai 'some day', my heart breaks. Mumbai is just a ninety-minute plane ride away. But it could as easily be the North Pole. To them, it is remote, inaccessible and intimidating. A fantasy-factory that bears no connection to the real thing, but resembles all those over-the-top Bollywood films that are shown in old-fashioned cinema halls dotting the city.

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There are no diversions for these folks—no restaurants, caf  s, coffee chains, pubs, clubs, or hang-out areas. Bollywood is their only escape. And even Bollywood is beginning to bore them with its sameness. The older generation is stuck on Hollywood—or rather on a single film, *Octopussy*, which was partly shot in Udaipur more than twenty-five years ago. They speak of 'James Bond'

(played by Roger Moore) and his exploits, pointing out where he stood, sat, shot at villains, was chased by goons or flirted with a Bond babe (Maud Adams—does anybody remember her?), as if the whole thing had happened only yesterday. Hotel staff point to nooks and corners that featured in the movie and fondly narrate the day a really hot and bothered Moore returned from a long shoot in the merciless sun and plunged straight into the swimming pool without bothering to get out of his perfectly tailored bespoke suit!

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As we head back to Mumbai, after a trip to the pilgrimage town of Nathdwara, a two-hour drive away, I once again marvel at our resilience—the famous Indian resilience that is both a boon and a curse. In this picturesque setting, it's easy for tourists to gush over the 'timelessness' of the place, and find the whole Rajasthan experience 'charming'. Which it most certainly is. **Even I was going ga-ga over the soft-spoken, lilting speech of locals and was swept off my feet by our doe-eyed female butler who took such immense pride in sharing local lore.** Tales abound. Legendary queens of such spectacular grace and beauty that marauding Mughals were ready to lay down their arms for a single glimpse of milady. It's the innocence of the narrators that breaks my heart. At a practical level, we could still be stuck in the fifteenth century. It's as if nothing of consequence has happened in the ensuing ages. Women are still veiled and the men continue to twirl impressive moustaches as they sit around waiting for 'progress' to come a-knocking. Everything appears

primitive and un-modern. Basic and uncomfortable. Yet, the demeaning contrasts between the super-luxurious life inside those marble palaces and hotels and the cramped, dirty *gallis* of the city don't seem to bother these idle residents, who watch without rancour multi-millionaires partying on the royal barge, as attentive chefs prepare succulent tiger prawn kebabs, all the while precariously balancing on a bobbing pontoon moored in the middle of Lake Pichola. Do these trusting, proud and polite people never resent the absurdity of it all? A bottle of wine being quaffed by a noisy bunch of revellers would pay for an entire family's meals for a month. **There is no anger in the eyes, no sardonic twist to the mouth.** The boatmen ferrying us from the palace jetty to the shore are incongruously dressed like Venetian gondoliers. They speak broken English, bow deferentially and accept tips gratefully. It all seems bizarre, like the meals we've enjoyed, eaten off gleaming Versace crockery. *Daal makhani* and Gianni? Strange marriage, *na*?

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I wonder what Sreenathji makes of all this as he glowers at his devotees. **Sreenathji is a superstar in the pantheon of gods and goddesses. You don't go to him. He summons you.** If you know what's good for you, you wisely drop everything and rush for that fleeting darshan (he doesn't deign to allow the faithful more than a brief glimpse of his divine self. Blink, and the curtain is pulled

across the door barring your view). My daughter and I make it to the noon darshan by the skin of our teeth. A very agitated guide is waiting impatiently in the white-hot noon-day glare for us to show up. 'Hurry', he urges. 'He will not wait for anyone . . .' We hurry. The modest, unpretentious temple that attracts millions of devotees, mainly Gujaratis from the neighbouring state, is clean by the usual standards. And there aren't too many pesky priests trying to extort fees for special privileges. We take our places and Sreenathji, clad in yellow and white (his attire is changed seven times daily), looks at us with half-shut, scornful eyes. When the chanting of the men behind us reaches a crescendo, it is one of those mystical moments when beauty overwhelms the senses and leads to tears. A kindly, silver-haired priest places a gentle hand on my head and shoulder to comfort me, and says in a murmur, 'Don't cry, sister . . . be happy . . . you are in the presence of the Lord . . . isn't he magnificent?' So he is. I don't want to leave. But Sreenathji has had enough. The curtain is firmly drawn and the congregation is dismissed.

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Such an important pilgrimage centre and how depressingly shabby. It seems somehow more 'appropriate' and humble. But the guide tells me in a hushed voice that soon everything will change. India's premier business house (Ambani) has taken over the running of the complex, since the family believes it was thanks to Sreenathji's blessings that they



prospered. Arundhati stared at the makeshift car park and said wryly, 'I hope they start right here . . .' as we clunked back into our 'tourist vehicle' (gloved driver wearing gold ear-studs) and nearly fainted. **Dehydration was the obvious explanation. But I preferred 'life-altering religious experience'.**

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Driving to yet another palace-hotel en route, I briefly switched places with Liz Hurley. It was here at Devigarh that Hurley had announced her engagement (sort of) to her Indian Prince (well, at least he looked the part, in his trademark bandgalas). Much had been written about this imposing property by adventurous travel writers (mainly French). I had marvelled at its grandeur myself after seeing it in *Eklavya—The Royal Guard*. Devigarh was the chosen locale for the extravaganza, and as we approached it, I pondered why it had been picked by Vidhu Vinod Chopra, the maverick film-maker who'd gone ahead with the project despite film industry reservations. (What? No item songs?) Alas, Devigarh didn't look half as picturesque, and our hearts started to sink, as our parched throats cried out for paani. The driver (Mr Ear Studs) explained apologetically that this being 'off-season', and the beginning of a long, hot summer, the place was not looking its best. He was right. The Aravallis were forbiddingly harsh and stripped off all vegetation. The fort looked smaller and drabber than in the movie. Aah—the magic of great lenses,

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I said to myself, blowing kisses to the absent cameraman.

Once we were inside its welcoming and comparatively cool interiors, it was hard to imagine why Liz and gang had kicked up their heels in Devigarh. Handsome Rajput men in pristine white achkans took charge of our short time there but there weren't many other people around. Besides my daughter and myself, there were two other guests, an ancient German couple, struggling as they clambered up and down those terrifyingly deep granite steps. Once again, we were led to the Presidential Suite and I heard a familiar echo ('Amitabh Bachchan had stayed here for three months while shooting *Eklavya*'). Lucky him. It was a stunningly beautiful suite, with impeccable detailing and milky white marble everywhere. Did Liz occupy it, too? But what on earth did her travelling party do in this desolate fort, with no diversion for miles and miles? The pool plan? Spa? Non-stop sex? Tiring, man. Boring, too.

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*Aaah! Spa!* Like the rain in Spain, the spa in Udaipur is exactly what the doc ordered. A petite masseuse led me into a dark and fragrant room and offered to wash my feet in an intricately carved silver footbath. Oh God! This was too feudal and embarrassing. But irresistible, too. I wondered how that French lady across the room, with tired, faded blue eyes would feel having her pink, swollen feet gently washed in rose-water by a beautiful young girl with the softest hands ever. Like a maharani? It didn't end

there. The girl said a small prayer, recited a Sanskrit shloka and anointed the proffered feet with sandalwood paste. This was an experience that made each recipient come out of it smelling better than roses! Nicé. Very nice. And deliciously decadent. Habit-forming, too. Snap out of it, I ticked myself off sternly. This is a once-in-a-lifetime treat. You don't deserve it. Not after all that cribbing about the heat and dehydration. The lake right outside the delicate grille of the spa shimmered in the late evening sun. It had all been a mirage, after all. Everything is *maya*. Long live *maya*. Spa *maya*.

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**Maya has become the nation's duvet. We huddle and cuddle under it, seeking comfort in the alibis it offers.** 'The most generous people in India are the poor,' a jaded hotelier tells me, as we tuck into monstrously large lobsters from the Bay of Bengal. He goes on to narrate his experiences travelling to remote locations in Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand and Rajasthan in search of the perfect fort to convert into a boutique hotel. 'I'd stop at tiny villages and walk into a hut ... I'd be greeted with welcoming smiles, and offered water, if not tea. I'd talk to those simple villagers and ask them if they didn't dream about moving out of their miserable huts into the big city. They'd smile and say they were far better off where they were. It's the rich who are unhappy, discontented and restless.'

Did he have a point? I've often felt the same way

travelling through the vast, desolate countryside, pulling into an insignificant-looking hamlet and chatting with occupants of makeshift huts, some of them nothing more permanent than three bamboo poles covered with bright blue plastic sheeting. There'd be kids, womenfolk, men ... most of the adults engaged in road-work involving a lot of physical stamina. Women in tattered ghagras, naked babies tied around their waists in improvised slings, helping the men to prepare tar in gigantic cauldrons ... black, velvety, smooth tar boiling away over a wood fire. A huge woodfire with flames leaping skywards. All this in the middle of a searing summer!

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Switch a few key details around, and the story repeats itself—another site, a different job. Maybe a highrise, a mall, a highway. The labourers become interchangeable, expendable, once the job is done. Nothing and no one to protect them, their lives. No helmets, no safety nets, no compensation apart from the measly few rupees given at the contractor's whim. They can die on the job, and nobody would notice. Despite the hardship, they smile away broadly at strangers who stop to pick up chilled mineral water bottles from a kerbside kiosk for twenty bucks—their earnings for the day. The kids wave happily as a swanky Chevrolet zooms past. It is such a common experience, nobody pays the slightest attention to the irony of it all. We take such contrasts in our stride and discuss karma ... maya ... before snuggling under that soft duvet. It is foreigners who react. Always foreigners. And we promptly trot out our convenient maya theory.

Years ago, I featured in one of those snide international documentaries that feed on our maya syndrome. The script, predictably enough, stayed on course. The usual suspects (me, included!) were rounded up to 'provide personal perspectives on the paradoxes that dominate life in India. A particularly annoying erstwhile 'princess' from a pocket-sized 'state' was asked by the director to discuss her OTT lifestyle—the fancy cars and crumbling palaces, the inherited pearls (and diseases). She fell for it, and blabbered on, while allowing those monkeys complete access to her private residence. 'Don't you feel guilty—look at your wealth ... you have so much, when the majority has absolutely nothing ...' She lit a cigarette and answered dreamily, 'I have all this because of my good karma—why should I feel guilty? I must've done something wonderful in my previous life to enjoy so much in this one. As for those poor peasants—tough luck. It is in my destiny to own Cadillacs. And it is in theirs to ride on bicycles. In India, we accept our fate.' Though it sounded outrageously insensitive, the princess had boldly articulated what the majority believe. **Accept fate. Accept caste. Accept poverty. Accept everything. For it is pre-ordained. And there's no escape.**

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The villagers who simply say that they have no desire to leave their humble villages, are, in fact, telling the truth. They've lived there for centuries. They want nothing more. And yes, they do share whatever there is in their home with total strangers. It could be a crushed onion, a piece of jaggery, a green chilli, a glass of buttermilk, a bajra roti, a

bowl of rice. You walk into their home and you instantly become a *mehmaan* who must be honoured.

256 I reflected on this marvellous quality and felt ashamed of our hard, cold, city lives. Yes, even mine. I'd seen the change from the time I was a school-girl, and my parents would put themselves out for the few visitors we entertained. Ours was not a 'sociable' family. We did not maintain an open house. My own schoolfriends rarely came over for meals. And yet, when my father's relatives or colleagues were expected, they were received with whatever resources that were made available ungrudgingly. Over time, that too, changed. All of us became acutely aware of the pressures of coping in a frenzied world. We got busy. We got so busy, we barely had time to greet one another, as we rushed around trying to add 'quality' to our lives! Relatives and visitors rarely came by. And we rarely went a-calling. Instead, we remained steadfastly focussed on our personal goals, our personal ambitions, our personal agendas. This became 'normal'. We didn't notice the alterations. We didn't care. We were all doing 'well'. The family was 'prospering'. The children passed exams with first classes. Father got promoted. Mother got her diamond *kuddis*. The car was upgraded. There were bright new curtains in the living room. And we ate out over weekends. Wow! We were the happy middle class of India, with newer refrigerators and air conditioners. But we rarely laughed or chatted as we once used to. Where was the time for that, dammit?

Today, when I watch my children negotiate friendships, relationships ... whatever ... I marvel at the ease with which their generation manages to juggle emotions, time, priorities. Somehow, they seem to cope just fine, without the strain showing or getting to them. Well, for the most part.

These are privileged kids, who've had it easy. Even so, I'd say, their lives are more complicated, more complex, since they don't have reliable road maps to guide them. They know they must work hard. There is no option. They know they must succeed. Nobody wants to be seen as a loser. They know they must compete. Now, that's the tough part. Student suicides are on an increase, and sociologists claim it's a worldwide phenomenon that's finding echoes here. As if it's some sort of a tragic trend ... hey guys, it's in vogue in Texas to, like, kill yourself? It's like ... so cool, dude. So, where's the rope?

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Even if that's an absurd exaggeration, the fact remains that students across India are struggling to find stability. This goes beyond youthful angst and Camus-style *The Outsider* posturing. There is a mind-boggling combination of both despair and euphoria, a lethal cocktail. Students who can't handle its potency fall by the wayside. Yes, some of them reach for that rope, or a bottle of insecticide ... say goodbye to it all. Leaving perplexed and wracked-by-sorrow parents behind. 'Why?' ask fathers and mothers of those healthy, high-achieving nineteen-year-olds, who've

given zero indication of their desperation. No answer. So we console ourselves with the thought that at least our kids aren't picking up guns and shooting one another, like they do on American campuses.

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But wait a minute—what about that besotted loverboy from Rourkela, Avinash Patnaik, who shot his Jezebel girlfriend's family before shooting himself? What about Rizwanur? Jessica? Others? Bam! You're dead. Exceptions, we insist lamely. Nothing but exceptions. And we take comfort in the fact that oh, unlike those foreigners, we aren't a violent society, our children still stay at home with us. So far, so good. Family still matters. Or that's what we'd like to believe, as we eagerly stuff laddoos and barfis down protesting young gullets during festivals. And pat ourselves on the back that our *betas* and *betis* are 'basically so loving, so caring'. Yeah, just like in all those Bollywood films and Ekta Kapoor TV serials. Basically, that's true. Very basically.

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And yet, one hears stories that reflect a different and very bitter truth. Parents blame the Internet for corrupting India's youth, refusing to accept responsibility. We've found a perfect villain in the Internet, which is being accused of breaking up families, eroding traditional values and generally damaging the delicate fabric of Indian society. The irony being, so much of India's current status is based directly on its position as a global IT leader. The very people driving this change are the ones directly affected by it. The



Call Centre Syndrome has inspired books, movies, music videos, jargon, fashion, food habits, lifestyles ... virtually every aspect of life even for those not directly involved with the BPO revolution.

Since I travel frequently to Pune, I know just how rapid and radical this change has been. In under ten years, Pune has got totally transformed. It's another city. I no longer relate to it as passionately as I once did. And I fail to recognize several localities that have undergone a dramatic make-over. So dramatic, in fact, that old residents have either fled, or been pushed out to the fringes of this once tranquil city of scholars. On a recent visit, I commented to my husband that there were hardly any Maharashtrians in sight, leave alone Pune-kars.

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But that could also be a harsh, new reality underlining the absence of people visibly over forty! There are no sweet, old grannies around, wearing the traditional *kashta*-style sarees so typical of the region. There are no dhoti-clad grandpas either. Most areas are overrun by BYTs (Bright Young Things) dressed in denim and tearing around on bikes. Most swanky apartment blocks are leased out to the countless IT professionals who've placed Pune on the global grid. To cater to these restless folk, entire areas like Koregaon Park have pumped up the experience, with coffee chains, ice cream parlours, massage shacks, cafés offering multi-cuisine from across the world, lounge bars, night clubs, boutiques, art galleries, spas ... the standard 'amenities' that satellite cities in the thick of an 'image switch' have to offer, if the new arrivals so demand.

And the new arrivals demand all that—plus, plus, plus! Why not? They are so conscious of their ‘contribution’, they want a big bang for their buck. They definitely want their money’s worth, paisa vasool, as we say in Mumbai. But in the hurry to provide these, entire cities are losing their original identity. And so rapidly, at that, it’s becoming harder and harder to tell them apart. When I’m in Bangalore, I could as easily be in Pune (separated by a formidable distance of 835 kilometres). Ditto for Hyderabad, or Jaipur to a lesser extent. City centres look the same, since important landmarks have been torn down to make room for malls, glass-fronted office spaces, towering apartments, all in the name of development and progress. The people moving into these ‘cities of the future’, look alike, talk alike, think alike. They move where their jobs take them. Given their crazy work hours, they have zero time to invest in cultivating relationships.

Life is fragile, too, as a young female BPO employee discovered when she hopped into a ‘dedicated’ taxi to get home—only to be raped and killed by the two men she believed were responsible drivers, not men with criminal records. Pune struggled to ‘damage-control’ the mess. But the story left a nasty stink that seriously affected the amazing BPO saga driving Pune’s economy. The BPOwallahs woke up to the sinister possibilities of isolation. The closed lives, the shut-off-from-the-world existence. The upside-down nature of their surreal profession.

Their neighbours, too, are like them—young

professionals in transit. Nobody wants to invest in anybody else. Meet. Greet. Move on. Their idea of relaxation does not go beyond smoking up or knocking back gallons of vodka at posh bars which waive cover charges for single women, but extract a fat fee from stags. The mating game is brief, furtive and frenzied. It's sex-driven and that's about it. 'Need-based', as a young female engineer told me with a naughty grin. Strictly no strings attached, no obligations. A hit-or-miss transaction, with zero expectations. No time for love-shove. No time to marry. No time for kids. Family-shamily? You must be joking. Speed-dating is here to stay. And if all else fails, there's romance on the Internet, and virtual sex with strangers. Who says life's boring?

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*Garibi Hatao* was the war-cry adopted by Indira Gandhi's cheerleaders. It was as good or as fake as the earlier *Jai Jawan*, *Jai Kisan*. In a nation where there is no shortage of *naaras* for any and every occasion, both slogans were emotive enough to inspire the masses. But inspire them to do what? Construct 'meaningful' floats for the annual Republic Day parade down Rajpath? The toiling masses represented by a few 'babalog', generally nephews and nieces of ministers, diligently ploughing plastic fields as the float cruises past the presidential bullet-proof enclosure, with the 'Honoured Guest' taking the ceremonial salute ('Bonjour, Sarkozy! Ou est la Bruni?')? All this would be seen in millions of homes across India,

on Doordarshan, the government channel, with over-enthusiastic anchors gushing, 'Oh ... look out for our brave jawans! Cheer for our hard-working kisans!' Everybody would clap and feel patriotic, waiting for the grand finale (tri-colour plumes-spewing jets streaking across the sky). *Garibi never looked so photogenic.*

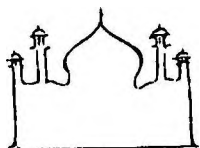
262 So many years later, it remains equally photogenic. And now sociologists are telling us, *garibi sells*. People from Sweden come to India in search of poor people, since this generation of Europeans has not seen what an honest-to-goodness poor person looks like. Prosperous NRIs also come in search of poverty. They point to the rapidly proliferating slums and tell their grandkids (the ones who speak with a yankee twang, or a cockney accent), 'See those slum-dwellers? They are very poor ... India is also very poor ...' **And the kids stare wide-eyed at the misery their grandpas had wisely abandoned so they could enjoy a better life.** Their version of India is the one projected by the commercial film industry—lurid, exaggerated, grotesque. They feel hopelessly let down, when what they see is far removed from a *Namaste London*, filmed in soft focus. Every Indian has his or her own 'Garibi Hatao' theory. We all agree it should be hatao-ed—but how? No solutions.

We have begun to view our own poverty through a vaseline-coated lens and kind of accept it—like one accepts an ugly mole on the chin. We don't actually 'see' it. Equally, it doesn't disappear by itself. It has to be surgically removed, or covered with a thick layer of concealer. Clever make-

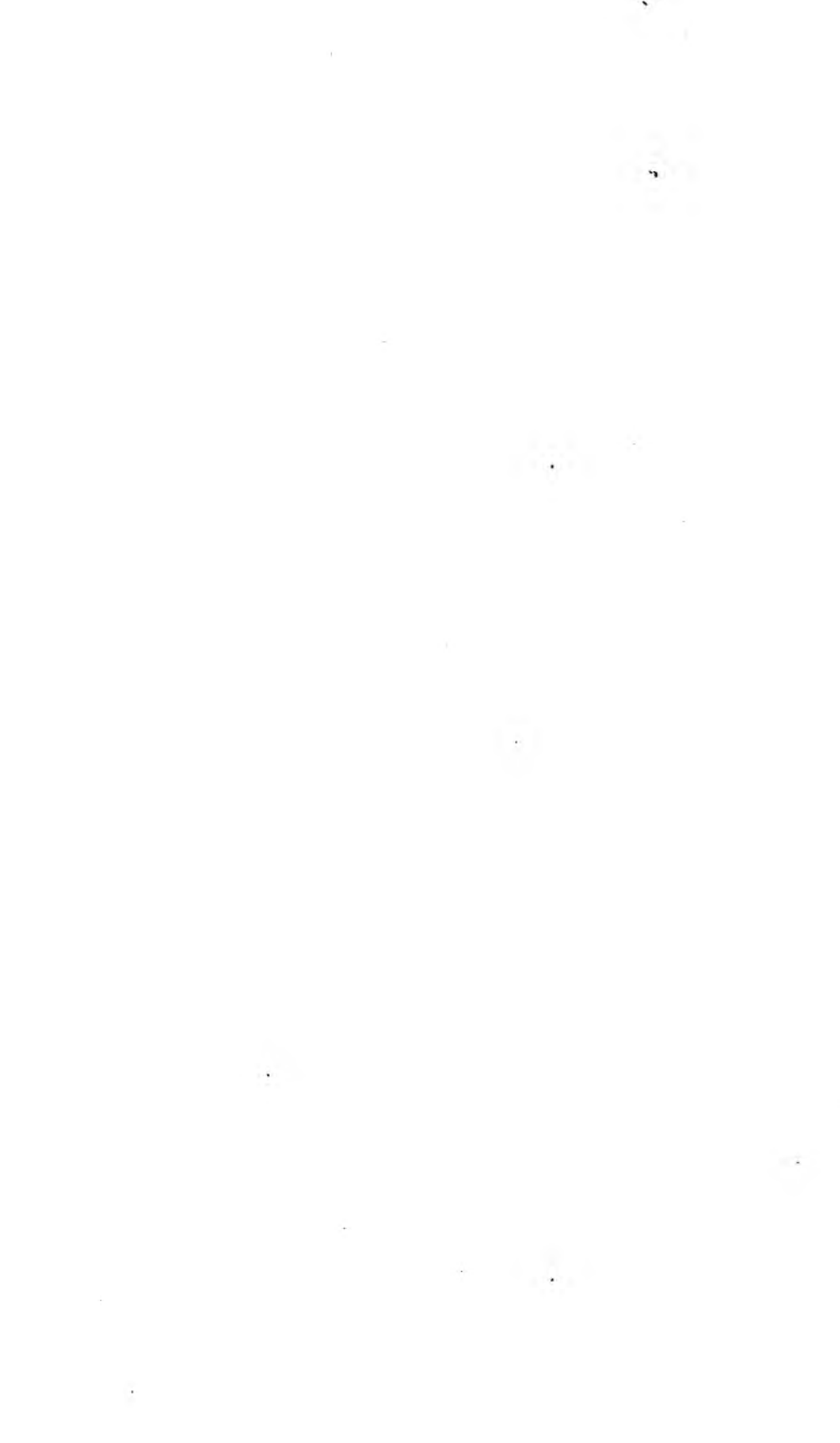
up saves the worst situation, as any successful fashion model will tell you. Well, our cosmetics department is going easy on the foundation, which means, the world can stare at our ugly spots. *Theek hai*. We are philosophical and patient. One day, we tell ourselves, *garibi* will become *gayab*. Bang! Blink! And Bingo! Gone. No more *garibi*. Till then, we'll talk about the 'problem' ad nauseam, and pretend things aren't all that bad.

'Poor people like being poor. They don't want to become rich,' I'm frequently told. Never by a poor person, of course. Always, a wealthy, smarmy person in a designer suit. 'Ask any villager ... he'll tell you he's better off being poor ...' It's difficult to keep a straight face at such times. So ... what are we saying here? The poor want to stay poor? If that is so, then why do thousands of poor people come to Mumbai from all over India? To stay poor in Mumbai? Maybe. Do the homeless who scrounge around in garbage dumps and sleep on Mumbai's pavements stoically accept the deal and get misty-eyed about their own existence? Or do they look up at buildings as incongruously named as 'Persepolis', 'Miami' or 'Acropolis', and wonder what it's like to sleep on a thick, springy mattress in a cool, dry, air-conditioned room, after eating a hearty meal of chicken tikka masala washed down with beer? Do they stop their thoughts, for fear of going mad with rage? Ask them, if you dare.

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superstar india



Revolution.  
*Andolan.*  
Watch out, the  
Naxalites are here.





So the self-styled intellectuals in Delhi tell us, arranging their expressions into careful scowls of deep concern. 'They are everywhere ... before you know it, the entire north-east will be gone ... just like that. Those buggers are ruthless. And very organized. What discipline in their ranks! We ignore them at our own peril. See what's happening in Nepal? Maoists and Naxalites are more dangerous than those Al Qaeda types. You know why? They look like you and me. They speak like you and me. They could be your neighbours.' I started to stare shamelessly at mine, each time we met in the elevator. These guys? Naxalites and Maoists? Naah! But who knows?

That's the whole problem these days. We are like fruit salad—or *bhel puri*. With our 'prosperity' and economic boom we have grown 'non-discrete'. In the old days, one could tell a person's persuasion from his attire. Not anymore.

I still recoil when our family priest shows up for the annual Satyanarain puja, clad in jeans and twirling the keys of his motorbike, while placing his helmet at the entrance, along with the latest trainers he has to remove before changing gear and clothes. Minutes later, he is bare-chested

and dressed in a diaphanous cotton dhoti, the sacred thread nestled in his thick chest-hair. Before he gets down to business, he chats informally about current affairs ... pop music (he sings at concerts when he isn't praying for our salvation), politics (Congress loyalist) ... and I wonder. If I were to run into him on the street someday—would I recognize this light-eyed dreamboat in denim as the same man who recites Sanskrit shlokas as unflinching as his forefathers before him (he is the sixth-generation Saraswat Brahmin priest in the family)? What about his eight-year-old son? The one who watches *Ratatouille*, *Boogie Woogie* and dreams of owning a Playstation soon? Will that boy take the trouble to understand the shastras, memorize shlokas, conduct rituals at births, weddings and deaths, like his father? Would that be his day job? Impossible! All that knowledge, all those traditions, so meticulously practised over two centuries, will in all probability end with the dreamboat.

Each year, I watch the priest's expanding waistline (he is clad in just a dhoti, remember) and marvel at the ease with which he straddles two worlds. It seems so effortless ... it couldn't have been so for his father or grandfather. He tells me they'd go from home to home, performing daily pujas for the regulars on their beat. These were precious family associations, established over generations. They fostered close bonds within the community and kept the *pujaris* in business. Those were the days when *pujaris* looked like *pujaris*—no confusion there. But now? My *pujari* could be a pop star!

So if I can't tell a simple pujari by looking at him, how can I possibly identify a hardcore Naxalite/Maoist? This was my dilemma in Kathmandu a few years ago (in fact, just a week before the bloody palace massacre decimated Nepal's royal family). Drawing-room conversation in those ancient salons revolved around the Maoist-on-the-doorstep, and how nobody could be trusted, least of all 'faithful' family retainers! Seven days later, the Crown Prince himself had gone berserk and slaughtered most of his family. An event surely more frightening than blood-thirsty Maoists infesting the region.

**Ditto for the terrorist in our midst. The educated doctor/engineer/writer/banker/chemist/chartered accountant—take your pick.**

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Can you tell he/she has murder and mayhem as their main agenda? Why, even the world's sharpest intelligence agencies are easily fooled (think of the Glasgow bombers). Even they go by appearance. There could be a terrorist at my dinner table, and frankly, even I might feed the person some more mishti doi, in all ignorance. *Careless Whispers* used to be one of my favourite George Michael songs. It dealt with adulterous love affairs and deceit. Today, when I listen to the words and sway foolishly to the music, my mind stays on the 'careless' part—who can afford to be careless any more? And is there anything like too careful?

Violent? Indians? Not me. Not us. But the fact remains we have never been anything other than volatile. Turning the other cheek was not seen as the best option. Read the *Mahabharat*, filled as it is with hatred, trickery, betrayal and

duplicity. What are we talking about? By creating *rakshasas* (demons) outside of ourselves, we check our inherent hot-headnesses and play docile. We try very hard to stick to Gandhian principles even as we control the urge to slap the next idiot who annoys us. It's a wonder we aren't at each other's throats more often. There is a Naxalite/Maoist that lurks in all of us. We are all closet revolutionaries, even if the causes vary wildly. Indians have an opinion on any and every subject. No encouragement is required to air it. Even though I have occasionally snapped, 'Actually I haven't asked you ....do you mind?' 'If you ask me ...' is a frequently heard phrase. And I love it. How bland life would be if all of us were to maintain neutrality, not take sides nor argue furiously??

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Recently, at the airport in Vienna, after a long trans-Atlantic flight from New York, our bags went missing. My husband went off to report the matter and was gone for an hour or more. Ridiculous! When I went in search of him, I met with a strange sight. There was Mr Dé talking agitatedly to a very cool woman behind an impressive desk. She had driven my husband nuts by assuming a very European, very politically correct, annoyingly legalistic stance on the issue. For us, it was an emotional moment. For the Austrian clerk, it was a statistic. A technicality. One more number to address, before turning those ice-blue eyes to the next distressed passenger whose baggage was somewhere else, maybe gone forever. This impassive approach drives Indians crazy. Had the woman reacted in a less robotic manner, my husband's mood would have been more forgiving. I thought

he was going to pick up her fat purse and hurl it at her. 'Bloody Indians,' I could read her thoughts. 'They're all the same ... terrorists!' Perhaps a small grain of truth in that?

Sometimes, while watching TV footage of our parliamentarians slugging it out, I feel more amused than annoyed. There they are, these men and women, whom the people of India have elected to represent us, to safeguard our interests to craft policies that serve us. And what are they up to? Oh ... the usual—flinging chairs, microphones, files, books and abuses at each other, exchanging fisticuffs, attempting to uproot benches and tear each other's clothes off. Basic behaviour, sans artifice.

Come on ... we  
are Indians. We  
let it all hang out.  
Which is why we  
are healthier,  
stronger

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Raw and true to themselves, even as TV cameras roll and the entire nation watches. There is no self-consciousness at that point. Just spontaneous bad behaviour. Restraint? Maturity? Come on ... we are Indians. We let it all hang out. Which is why we are healthier, stronger. No repressions. No suppressions. You feel like it—you do it! How refreshing is that!

If we didn't have this safety valve, perhaps we too would suffer from some of the sicknesses that plague Western societies—or worse—we'd revolt en masse, take to the streets, allow a dictator to emerge from our midst, start a revolution. Instead, we curse and spit, but rarely organize

ourselves into a disciplined movement. Given our differences, it's a wonder we haven't experienced a coup d'etat, that more states haven't broken away demanding independence. The reason we hang in there is because we know in our heart of hearts that this is the best option at present. Whenever the situation becomes unbearable, we can punch the next person and get it out of our system. Settle the score on the spot and get on with it. This is how the story has been so far. Will it change? It might...

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Mumbai was shocked when a sixteen-year-old student was brutally murdered by his own friends who'd demanded a Rs 2-crore ransom from the boy's father. 'This sort of crime is new to our society', declaimed everybody. And facile explanations soon followed. 'Youngsters today are directionless ... they're behaving like American teenagers, killing for money ... killing for the thrill of killing ...' It's true there has been a spate of 'sick' crimes during the past five years. Crimes that are described as 'Western', since we associate them with societies that are dysfunctional and which make us feel superior. 'These things didn't happen in India,' senior citizens state ruefully. 'Imagine killing a teenager ... imagine killing little children ... all these new crimes involving sex ... we are picking up bad habits from the West. Our children are getting corrupted, watching American films and TV serials ...'

**Yup. We need alibis and scapegoats. Because we don't want to believe that our wonderful society has, in fact, changed. Perhaps, forever.** And today's desi teenagers are no different from teenagers in Tokyo/

Los Angeles. They kill. They maim. They attack. It could be for a pair of the latest trainers, an iPod. A cell phone. And yes, there are sickos in our society too. Men like the Delhi child-molester and his manservant, who lured prostitutes and kids to his master's mansion, sexually abused and later murdered them. A nullah filled with skulls and bones of victims the police failed to find?

It has happened in the past. The big difference between then and now? The intervention of the 'nosey media' in search of the scoop. Without enthusiastic ambulance-chasers, perhaps killings and crimes of this kind (perpetrated by middle-class, educated psychopaths) would have remained buried in obscure police records. After all, those kids of disenfranchised slum-dwellers aren't 'worth' the trouble and expense involved in tracing their killers. They're dispensable. Just numbers. Their parents reproduce and breed like animals, anyway. What's a missing kid or two in such a situation? Heartlessness and indifference over years ensured that these stories did not see the light of day. It was only the TRP wars raging between competing news channels that highlighted the horrors of such situations. Even in this grim scenario we conveniently sought a way out by passing the buck onto the 'Americanization' of our society.

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Actually, the script is about money. And the arrogance it has always bred in our feudalistic society. A rich man's crime was treated in a significantly different manner from the same crime committed by someone poor. **Money was the ultimate insulation. To an extent, money**

**still is.** Cops treat rich people differently. Mainly because cops know that if they don't, the same accused will use money-clout to fix the case, get out and then fix the cop! There are two sets of laws operating across the board, whether we admit it or not. The rich and powerful can and do get away with murder, after a few token attempts by the officials to show that they are treating the biggies impartially. Barring a few exceptions, law enforcement officers are overawed by wealth. The same way the toiling masses used to be in the days when maharajahs ruled over their princely states and mercilessly exploited the peasants.

274 One still sees displays of cringe-making obsequiousness in the presence of the mighty. In fact, the mighty themselves don't quite realize how absurd they sound when they talk resignedly about the rise and rise of the Dalits, and how the future of India is in the hands of the SCs/STs, whose numbers seem to be growing and growing. 'Soon they'll walk into our homes and kick us out ...' an acquaintance phoned to complain, adding, 'We can't do anything, or even say a word when they hook up loudspeakers in our areas and create such a din.' Another suggests helpfully, 'Why not complain to the police? It's just not fair ...' A shrewder voice joins the debate to point out, 'It's their time now ... they've been kept under our shoes for centuries. Be thankful they aren't walking into your living room and killing you ... tolerate those loudspeakers. It could be worse ...'

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**Our skins are too thin. No. Our skins are too thick.**

**Both statements are true.** We react. That's it. Most times we over-react. At others, when we really need to yell, scream and shout, we turn into passive pussycats. National issues leave us cold. For example, the response to the nuclear issue in August 2007 was pretty tepid on the whole. The average Indian may have been baffled and assumed it was too technical an area to get into—leave it to the leaders, he told himself. The leaders, taking advantage of the apathy, went into over-drive in Parliament ('Government likely to fall. Left threatening to withdraw support ...'), while TV anchors hyperventilated on news programmes. The rest of India didn't bother. I mean ... here was a really, really major issue demanding a national debate, given the seriousness of the long-term implications. But we chose to be indifferent.

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Around the same time, Kapil Dev, the legendary cricketer, announced he'd go on a 'hunger strike' if expelled from the Cricket Board of India. The whole country took sides. Everyone had an opinion. Should he go? Should he stay? Had he done the right thing by challenging the Board and setting up a parallel body? Was his decision 'good for cricket'? Nobody asked whether Manmohan Singh's decision on the nuke deal was 'good for India'. Strange. We would have been sending ourselves down the tube to better serve American interests, but we maintained an uncharacteristic sangfroid. So much for our reputation for being passionate! Passionate about a colonial game like cricket? You bet! Hyde Report? Wat dat?

Talking to Ali, my Yemeni chauffeur in Singapore, I was surprised and delighted to converse with someone as well-informed and concerned about India and the entire region. Pointing to Singapore's flag displayed prominently by residents of the island-state, he laughed derisively. 'The government instructs: "Show pride. Display flag".' And we do it. Like sheep. Life is becoming more and more expensive. We are told to grow more trees. Keep Singapore green and clean. But our salaries remain the same and expenses keep going up ... what a life! And we can't protest!' See ... I said to myself. Every human being in the world wants the right to protest. Take that away, and you might get a well-fed moron, but a passive, frustrated individual chewing futilely at the bit. Ali was philosophical, 'I am a long way from home ... I was born here.' Interesting that 'home' remained in distant Yemen, a place he'd never visited and wasn't likely to. Singapore was where he'd schooled, grown up, married, and produced three sons. And yet, his dreams were dominated by his grandfather's version of 'home'.

As we sped towards the airport, along a broad motorway lined by perfectly tended trees (identical in height), Ali asked me whether I knew Ben Kingsley. Strange question. I told him I didn't, but why did he want to know? 'I loved him as Gandhi ... though he should have starved and lost more weight for the role, especially for the scenes where he's on a hunger-strike! Gandhi was a great man. India is lucky to have had a Gandhi. When I'm depressed, I watch the film again and again ... just to learn how to become a

better human being. You are so fortunate being Indian. Being free ...' My heart did a somersault. How bizarre this conversation sounded ... everything was strange. The setting, the context, the man behind the wheel.

I'd just come out of an important seminar designed to assess sixty years of Indian Independence. Most of the speakers had sounded optimistic and upbeat. The crowd had consisted of local Indians in search of Bollywood stars, and a motley crowd of Singaporean businessmen in search of investors. Nobody looked all that proud or especially delighted to be Indian at such a historic moment. I was surprised at the lack of enthusiasm and thought to myself, had this been America, every American present would have walked around waving the Stars and Stripes, chest out and body language saying it all. We spoke about India being a superpower, and yet nobody was behaving like a super-Indian. There was still an air of apology ... even astonishment. As if we couldn't believe our own luck. And there was my driver from Yemen. I imagine how disillusioned he would have felt had he discovered young Indians who'd never heard of Gandhi, or weren't quite sure whether or not he was Sonia's father-in-law!

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A couple of months before that trip to Singapore, I'd undertaken my virgin trip to China. It had been a ten-year-old dream to go there, especially to Shanghai, Mumbai's long-lost cousin (according to fans of Art Deco

architecture). I was jealous even before our plane touched down. Shanghai looked impressive from the sky, once our aircraft penetrated the thick haze of pollution that hangs over China. My heart sank as I surveyed the airport and conceded it was far superior to Mumbai's international terminal. Spotlessly clean. No stench. But aah ... no porters, either! At least we scored in one crucial area. By the time we located our local minder, our arms had nearly come out of their sockets with the weight of our suitcases and we were ready for a hot meal, besides a shower plus a comfy bed. All that was a couple of hours away, as our minder, an elderly lady with a shuffling, slow gait, screamed into a battered mobile phone, unable to locate the driver. Her English was dodgy and our patience was rapidly running out. My jealousy levels were gradually coming down. 'Just like India,' I gleefully told my husband, who didn't find the comment particularly apt or reassuring. It got better after this point, even if the weather had turned gloomy and it had started to rain. **'Please don't say "Just like India" again,' my husband warned. But I was far too busy taking notes and comparing.**

Hmmm ... better roads, that's for sure. Shabby tenements lining the route. Peeling paint. Clothes hanging out to dry. Dismal exteriors. So-o-o-o reassuring. OK. OK. The flyovers were amazing, unending and looped snakily like the ones in the plastic board games I once played, involving toy cars racing around complicated tracks. As we neared our hotel, my depression had set in good and proper. The guide's incessant chatter and propagandist spiel was

getting on my nerves. I wildly launched into my own counter-propaganda, sounding stupid to my own ears. She was parroting statistics and reeling off Chinese achievements because she was paid to do so. And me? I whispered to my husband not to give her too generous a tip. She had succeeded in bringing out the chauvinist in me.

Later the same night, hopping into a cab to go find 'M' on the Bund—the chic-est address in town—I was pleased to note that all our communication was via sign language. Nobody spoke a word of English or even tried to. Advantage India! My devilish glee was short-lived, as I discovered soon enough that the Chinese were managing just fine without a working knowledge of the world language! Touts and pimps along the pedestrian strip in front of the garish Holiday Inn didn't hesitate for a micro-second before accosting my husband and offering him 'young boys, young girls ... drugs ... currency ... fake watches ... everything cheap-cheap ...' Buzzed and booming, the city looked like a luridly made-up transvestite soliciting custom. Unsure of which gender to peddle wares to, but ready to do business, regardless. But at least Shanghai wasn't spooky, like St Petersburg. If anything, it made me feel entirely at home. Mumbai's sleaze seemed tame in comparison to Shanghai's full-on hard-sell. Everything and everyone seemed to be on sale here, as we jostled our way past aggressive hawkers and teenagers offering themselves, along with fake Gucci bags and Rolex watches. The side streets were filthy, with open gutters and mounds of uncleared

garbage. The tops of glitzy new skyscrapers were invisible. At first I thought it was mist rolling in and obscuring the higher floors. But no—it was actually a thick, gritty cloud of smog. The same smog international environmentalists are despairing over and China refuses to own up to.

280 Shanghai's famous night life lived up to its reputation. The legendary and ever-exuberant Michelle, who runs 'M' on the Bund with so much flair and panache, escorted us to the terrace of her pricey restaurant to experience the magic of the Bund at night. It was a spectacular sight all right. But, I consoled myself, so is Mumbai's Marine Drive and the famous Queen's Necklace, when it shimmers in all its glory after sunset. The crowd at 'M' was largely made up of expatriates, with a few well-heeled locals, knocking back beer at the island bar, while house music encouraged the more energetic guests to dance to its catchy beat. We could've been anywhere in the world—even New York. The Australian-born Michelle, who runs an equally chic place in Hong Kong, looked around her sprawling establishment and agreed. Sensibly, she'd retained most of the colonial details when she leased the place. The building 'M' was housed in resembled similar buildings from that era in Kolkata and Mumbai. The furniture, fans, slatted windows and high ceilings reminded me of countless such structures back in India. I asked Michelle why she hadn't thought of opening an 'M' in Mumbai. She smiled mysteriously. *Ab Mumbai door nahi!* That's all we need to complete the circle—an Australian entrepreneur opening a European-style restaurant, based on a successful Chinese

model, right here in Mumbai!

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**Would Chairman Mao have approved? I posed for a souvenir pic under his enormous portrait in what is billed as the world's largest square.** I wondered aloud what those menacing-looking Chinese guards outside his mausoleum would do if I suddenly broke through the cordon and ran, like kids do, with arms outstretched (to show I meant no harm and was unarmed). 'Don't even think of it,' our young, pretty and clever guide in Beijing told me, her voice rising a decibel or two at the prospect. I assured her I was joking. She looked visibly relieved as she confessed how sensitive her position was. 'I'm trying to become an official guide at the Beijing Olympics. My interviews start next week. If you do something like that, my future is finished ... I'll be blamed for not controlling you!' Oh, my God! Crazy or what? She was close to tears, with rivulets of sweat running down her face. Maybe she shouldn't have worn that plastic cap? But it wasn't the heat that was bothering her—it was my relentless questioning. After several evasive answers, and sensing my growing frustration, she finally admitted she had gone to a cop station the previous night and given a written undertaking that she wouldn't talk about anything related to politics, past or present, in particular anything to do with Tiananmen Square. She all but pleaded with me not to ask any more questions.

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I felt sorry for her. Divorced, with a young daughter she hardly saw, and ageing parents to support, she was not in a happy spot—and I was making it even less happy with my persistence. I backed off instantly. What does it matter if the poor guides are instructed to parrot the official line that ‘Nothing happened in the Square ... nobody was killed ... it is all Western propaganda’? No matter that a European businessman who lives in Beijing had given us a graphic account of what he’d seen for himself—and that included thousands of injured people in hospitals close to the historic Square, besides the dead. He claimed his doctor friends didn’t get to go home for days, busy as they were attending to the wounded and counting the dead. But ... the girl needed her job more than I needed the truth.

**Anyhow, what is the truth in China? Nobody knows. And nobody cares. As a veteran tells us cynically, ‘The young don’t want to know what happened at Tiananmen Square—it is not relevant to their lives. They aren’t interested in digging for facts. Their eyes are fixed on the West ... they want money. They long to travel. They want expensive clothes and great cars. They want to be like everybody else ... normal.’** After that conversation, I started to look more closely at the perky teens dressed in summer shorts, as they strolled along the banks of a canal near the Forbidden City.

Months later, I met similarly dressed young Chinese adults at my daughter’s B-school in Paris. Most had ‘English’ names and spoke fluent French. Clannish and driven, they hardly mixed with the other international



students, preferring to hang out with local Chinese friends. A bright-eyed student, flashing the latest cell-phone, answered my anxious queries about the best buys in town with a careless shrug. 'I bought my phone and phone plan from a Chinese dealer my friends introduced me to ... he gives all Chinese students a special rate.' Driving to the university, I'd noticed countless Chinese eateries—really casual dhabas selling cheap noodles. Given the profile of students from Pakistan and India studying in the area, how come there weren't more restaurants catering to them? A Pakistani taxi driver, hell-bent on resolving prickly outstanding issues between our two nations, provided the answer. 'I've been in France for thirty-six years. My children were born here. But they know "home" is Pakistan. We don't feel like investing our money in this country. My sons work for French employers there and earn good salaries. But they'll never start a business here. You see, even after working so hard, qualifying for top jobs, we know there is no real equality. My son was a brilliant student. He passed his engineering exam with top marks. But we all knew he wouldn't get the best job—that they'd judge him by the colour of his skin ... his religion. Professors and academics in France are mainly Jewish—they don't want us Muslims to rise.'

Oh dear.

'My parents wanted me to behave like an obedient Chinese girl still staying in China. How is it possible?'

While the cabbie's discourse was on, he lost the way and I ended up paying him 100 euros for a 60-euro taxi ride. But, I'd enjoyed the impassioned conversation.

Would a Chinese cabbie have confided as much to an unknown Indian woman?

As I gazed at the glorious skies over Paris, I recalled the thick, brown haze over Beijing. Pollution is one of China's major causes of global shame. But it is rarely referred to by that name. Locals change the subject or pretend they can't understand a word if one asks about the dismal and permanent blanket of muck overhanging the city. There are many topics that can't be raised in polite company. People of my generation bear bizarre names that translate roughly to 'Builder of the Nation'. The scrupulously indoctrinated guide avoids eye contact as she explains, 'We are patriotic people. We love our country. My parents are proud to have such names. It is all a part of nation-building.' Oh yeah?

Her parents (and thousands like them) are the real victims of the Cultural Revolution. It is they who stand abandoned by the very system they sacrificed so much for. Most were pulled out of school to work in mines and factories. I met an attractive woman in her fifties at my book-reading in Beijing. She told me with tears in her eyes how she had to give up her studies to work in a coal mine for ten long years. She survived (barely) by writing angry poetry on scraps of waste paper. When the mine shut down, she was jobless and unemployable, being a school dropout. Undaunted, she went ahead and educated herself by reading

whatever she could lay her hands on. Later, she married an Englishman, escaped to London, produced a daughter, but missed home! She couldn't explain the attraction, but obviously it was powerful enough for her to divorce the Englishman and come back with her daughter. She saw herself as a rebel, but a cautious one, 'Why take foolish risks?' she asked, before joining a besotted suitor—a Westerner who is promising her a better, freer, life in Europe.

I was told to stick to 'safe' passages from my books by the organizers of the reading. I took that as a signal to dig out the most provocative passages from my novels and read out the desi gaalis without inhibition. The assembled press people, along with local experts, seemed enthusiastic enough and even laughed discreetly at some of the more outrageous moments during the reading. The questions that followed were pretty tame and the evening was declared a success. Great. The next morning, during a radio interview, the young reporter asked whether I'd been 'nervous' about sharing my 'bold' work and views. 'Should I have been nervous?' I counter-quizzed her. She smiled mysteriously and carried on with the lively interview. Hers was an interesting story. Going by her strong American accent and lingo, I'd figured she'd studied overseas. Indeed, she had. Born to and raised in California by prosperous parents who'd left China under difficult circumstances, she'd chosen to come back by herself to the country of her ancestors.

Why?

Because she'd never accepted the aggressive American lifestyle and had grown up feeling confused about her own identity. 'My parents wanted me to behave like an obedient Chinese girl still staying in China. How is it possible? I wasn't allowed to date or call friends over. We only met other Chinese people. I thought, in that case, why live in America? Let me go back to China.' Any regrets? 'A few ... I live in a tiny, tiny flat. I miss American food. But at least, I have a wonderful boyfriend (white!) and my parents can't nag me!' A typically immigrant Amy Tan storyline but with a small twist. This girl came back!

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Strangely, I found it very easy to talk to all the people we met in China, especially the women. There was definitely a strong 'Asian factor' at work. I felt much closer to Chinese strangers than I generally do, to say, a Dutch/Swedish/French person. Somehow, we shared similar sensibilities that had little to do with our vastly, dramatically different lives. We instinctively 'understood' one another, without having to articulate every thought or explain anything. There was a spirit of mutual accommodation that was evident in small, informal but telling interactions. As part of the guided tour (no escape clause in these tightly-structured itineraries!), we had to pay the obligatory visit to pearl, silk and handicraft factories. When we strongly protested and tried to wriggle out of the fifth such 'visit', our guide sheepishly confessed that her supervisor would fine her if we skipped it or broke protocol. She couldn't afford to be penalized and pleaded with us to go along, for the sake of appearances. We naturally went along once we knew what

the deal was. At one such stop-over, the salesgirl asked my husband to show her his ring. She examined it carefully and offered an assessment of its value that was so bang on, we were startled by her expertise. She looked at another ring he was wearing and smiled, 'This is a gift from your wife ...' (it was!). 'But the first one is your wedding ring ...' Yup. Exactly so. I cannot imagine such a spontaneous exchange taking place in a European store. It would be considered ill-mannered, intrusive and offensive for a sales girl to engage a customer in a similar way. But in India we are accustomed to this and more. Here, total strangers think nothing of asking the most intimate family details. And most of us think nothing of responding! I love it!



The 'Xian' story was different. We were there to see the world-famous terracotta soldiers. There is absolutely nothing else to see in Xian, even though local guides are trained to drag visitors to other tourist destinations, including a visit to a rather ungainly marble statue of the Emperor's favourite mistress, a woman who is held up as the epitome of beauty and grace. Young Chinese girls are urged by their mothers to aspire to resemble the most famous concubine in the land. The fact that she is semi-naked and buxom came as a big surprise, especially since she is touted as an icon of sorts. Guides take you through her elaborate beauty routine and point to the personal spa created for the lady by the lovestruck emperor. Her images

are on sale in tacky souvenir shops, and I couldn't help laughing when a group of American tourists commented on the concubine's ample bosom. 'Gee ... I thought women out here were flat-chested.'

288 Despite these boring diversions, what visitors to Xian cannot ignore is the stupendous effort made by the government to ensure the hordes keep coming. There is just one industry in that part of China—and that involves the magnificent soldiers. Period. The idea is to milk the potential all the way and make sure tourists go back gratified having experienced something unique and, frankly, overwhelming. The city is geared to handle numbers and does so smoothly. From the time tourists disembark to their last goodbye, they are fully engaged in delving into the most incredible archaeological find of our times—the silent sentinels in battle formation that were accidentally discovered by a farmer digging for water in 1974. Well, that very farmer is also a part of the Xian show, as he sits there slurping noodles and signing autographs. These days he refuses to pose for pictures, but flashes a mechanical smile when he spots a camera. This is twenty-first century tourist hard-sell at its best.

Once again, I felt envious. Like us in India, China is courting the world and putting on a grand display. But unlike us, they've got it right. Everything is in place—the basic infrastructure, good roads, decent hotels, clean and well-organized sites, inexpensive food and no touts or beggars harassing the unwary. The only time we were pestered was when a gang of bottled water-sellers tried to rip us off by

demanding two yuan more than the official price. Our guide gave them a mouthful, even as they mocked her ('What's it to you if we overcharge foreigners ...?'). She was fuming and visibly upset as we got back into the roomy Chinese 'limo'. 'I feel so ashamed of my countrymen ...' she confessed, fanning herself vigorously with the lacy cap she'd been wearing throughout. We assured her things were exactly the same back in India ... but she was not to be consoled.

'My parents gave up so much for the country ... they are so poor, we hardly have enough food to eat. They live out in the countryside and their health has suffered because of all those years they spent in factories. They are uneducated and of no use to anyone now. Without a job and zero savings—you can imagine their condition. I have to support them the best I can. I do my job honestly, so naturally it upsets me to see such rascals trying to cheat tourists ...' My heart went out to her, as she spoke earnestly about her own uncertain future. Though she was thirty years old, she lived with her parents and was answerable to them. There was no question of dating or going out with friends over weekends. Her parents monitored all phone calls and didn't encourage her to meet men since there was 'shame' in having such relationships. Marriage? Yes, provided the parents approved. Had she never lost her heart to someone? Once, but the man got a better job in another district and disappeared with empty promises of coming back for her some day. She'd stopped waiting.

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Familiar stuff. But also puzzling. In smaller towns of

India, her story was common enough. But look at life in our metros! Which thirty-year-old woman waits for her parents' permission to go on a date? She'd be hooted out of her peer group, especially if she was engaged in an 'outdoor' job, dealing with dozens of foreigners on a regular basis, like our guide. I asked her if her experience was unique or pretty common. She insisted the custom was widespread, with unmarried daughters staying home to look after ageing parents. As she pointed out, 'There's no difference between us and our married friends. Women are supposed to stay home and look after the elders.'

290 With the earlier strict one-child-per-family rule, this has created a brand new social problem: A female single child hesitates to marry when she grows up, since she knows she'll be stuck with two sets of old parents—her own and her husband's. With nobody to share the responsibility, a young mother often suffers frequent breakdowns trying to keep her in-laws and parents happy, while catering to the needs of her own husband and child. Ooof! Two sets of parents, one grump of a hubby, a cranky kid ... and a job to hang on to. No wonder young Chinese women looked perpetually cross and sounded harassed. No wonder they didn't wear make-up or fuss over their hair. For what? For whom? Sensible shoes, non-descript, ill-fitting clothes ... but super-fabulous skin—clear, blemish-free, smooth. 'Oh that's because of the pearl cream we all use,' our guide told me. Pearl cream? I ended up buying a large jar at yet another government store. It resembled my mother's Hazeline Snow and felt good when



applied. The sales girl told me I'd be glowing within weeks. While she was at it, she also tried to flog another, far pricier cream. 'It has gold dust in it ... Chinese empresses and concubines used only this on their skin' ...'

No takers for moi in the concubine stakes and no kingdom left to conquer ... there was just no point in going for gold. But what did impress me was that most young girls avoided the heavy duty war-paint look which is so widespread in urban India. Most also stuck to weather-friendly simplicity in their choice of clothes. Paradoxically, the fair-and-lovely syndrome we are so familiar with had as many takers in China. Our guides in all the cities we went to were fastidious when it came to staying fully covered up when outdoors—caps, long-sleeved jackets, sun umbrellas—all this effort to remain untanned and white as driven snow. For white, they are. White and pink, like cherry blossoms in full bloom. Tall and angular, up north. Lean and wiry down south. The women far more attractive than the men. Again—just like in India!

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**Do we need to fear the Chinese? Are we being paranoid? Should Indians invest in attractive India-China funds?** Are the two countries running on parallel tracks? Should India trust China, especially when it comes to nuclear policies? Who poses a bigger threat to us—Pakistan or China?

These are basic concerns that don't require

interpretations from think-tank intellectuals nursing their *chhota* pegs in New Delhi's India International Centre. The simple and obvious answer to the first question is 'Yes'. We definitely need to be on red alert when it comes to China. With the world's largest standing army and the soaring territorial ambitions they have, there's no way we can sit back and relax. The Chinese are literally in our backyard. The new highway in the Himalayas is but one example of Chinese expertise and their game-plan. The north-east of India has been our country's least developed, least defended frontier—vulnerable on all levels, more particularly so on account of the physical dissimilarities between the people of those critically positioned seven states and the rest of India.

Physical features and food preferences apart, the geographical proximity to China is alarmingly close. The Chinese have to stroll in at a leisurely pace—and it will all be over. As it is, the Chinese ambassador boldly claimed Arunachal Pradesh for his own country, and India did not expel the man. Maybe he was testing the waters ... Since there wasn't much of an outcry, besides a few strident TV news anchors squawking away for a couple of days, I guessed the next pronouncement would be still more provocative. For whatever reason, we have been unusually lax about the Chinese presence in the north-east. Our energies have steadfastly focussed on Pakistan, even as Musharraf continued to taunt us, each time his own ratings dropped across the border.

God knows why it is, but 'people-to-people' contact

never fails to touch individual hearts. **Meet a Pakistani in a foreign land, and it is invariably a warm, wonderful encounter.**

In a hugely successful Pakistani-owned restaurant in Paris, close to the posh Galleries Lafayette, the maitre d' went out of his way to accommodate us, creating off-the-menu *kakdi-tamater-pyaaz* raita for me, since I was on a vegetarian diet because it was the Hindu holy month of Shravan. Not just that, he produced fingerbowls at the end of the meal, explaining we were special *mehman*, being neighbours. The French diners were politely ushered to a nearby washbasin. These sorts of gestures occur routinely. I've been to Pakistan just twice, and both visits were deliciously sentimental, with much nostalgia and genuine regrets that the people of the two countries were being artificially kept apart by self-seeking politicians. This is largely true. Each time one flags down a cab in New York city, chances of the cabbie being either a Bangladeshi or a Pakistani are pretty high. Once the introductions are done, nearly every brief encounter turns into a shared moment of camaraderie. Something special happens. There is instant empathy and an immediate connect. When one parts, it is always (perhaps absurdly so) like lovers saying goodbye.

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An old Pakistani cabbie in New York went ridiculously out of his way to help us en route to the JFK International airport at peak hour. When I gratefully whispered, '*Shukriya ji ... we'll always remember your kindness*,' he had tears in his eyes while saying, '*Khuda hafiz*'.

If this is happening in such a simple, uncomplicated

and real way—what is the ‘animosity’ the leaders keep talking about? ‘You are being naïve ... too trusting,’ I’m told by ‘Those Who Know’. They add, ‘The wounds are deep ... besides, look at what’s happening all over the world. Pakistan is no better than a rogue state—a cradle for terrorists.’ Students, in particular, seem polarized, even brain-washed. During my last trip to Karachi, which is frequently referred to as ‘The Poor Man’s Mumbai’, I saw more young girls sporting headscarves than I remembered from my earlier visit to Lahore. ‘It is true,’ said a friend. ‘Young people are furious about what happened post 9/11. They hate the discriminatory attitude of the Western world. They deeply resent racial-stereotyping or profiling, when they are singled out at international airports for strip-searching and close questioning. This is their way of hitting back. It’s defiance, nothing else. They want to assert their identity as Muslims. It is a reaction.’

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**A young journo, in low-rise jeans, spoke passionately to me during an extensive interview shot in one of Karachi’s gracious homes. She was chain-smoking throughout and talking too much. I put it down to youthful bravado.** What’s loosely described as ‘attitude’ on parade. I wanted to say, ‘Calm down, girl ... it’s okay.’ But she wasn’t really listening. Armed with an American degree in mass comm., she was out to revolutionize journalism in her country. She knew what she was up against, but was determined to soldier on. Before leaving, she hastily pulled on the discarded headscarf. ‘Don’t want to be seen without it—you never

know,' she winked. Mixed signals everywhere. So ... was she wearing it under duress? Or was it defiance?

I was keen to visit the famous dargah perched on the seashore. 'Are you confident? Certain you want to go?' my nervous hosts asked before sending a well-muscled gunman with me. 'It's a highly dangerous area full of druggies and transvestites. They can get aggressive,' the lady of the house cautioned. I was gone, before her sentence ended. Nothing happened. The gunman maintained a watchful eye, but from a distance. Yes, there were druggies and transvestites and they were aggressive. But, hey—I've lived in Bombay/Mumbai most of my life. This was a piece of cake! I got back an hour later to find relieved faces greeting my reappearance. 'We've had a really nasty burglary recently. We rarely leave our compound these days. Karachi has become unsafe and violent,' a beautiful *begum* informed me in dulcet tones, as she dealt with a shawl-seller displaying the most exquisite pashminas and *shahtooshes*. Shahtoosh shawls on sale? 'This is Pakistan. We just say these are Afghan shawls, and everybody looks the other way!'

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At a genteel dinner party, talk revolves around booze. It's an obsessive interest in this 'dry' country. Wealthy people hoard fine wines, whiskies and cognacs with immense care. It's the ultimate snob-trick to offer a rare single malt to a guest. Exquisite food, great hospitality and gorgeous women all add to an evening that's nothing less than splendid. Everybody is exaggeratedly polite, as conversation remains stuck in Bollywood gossip and

fashion designers from Delhi. Nobody gets into tricky terrain. Musharraf's name is rarely dropped, and the general impression given is one of controlled lunacy, with everybody in denial. The rich live in la-la land. They have the money to maintain fabulous homes in London, New York, wherever. Their children study overseas ('Naturally! There are hardly any good schools or colleges left in Pakistani.'). and they import brides from India and Dubai ('Your young girls—oof! Such style! *Mashallah!* We have a long way to go, compared to you.'). Deep-rooted envy surfaces periodically, but is swiftly checked. My outspoken interview on TV finds countless takers ... I know our thinking is parallel. But our lives are lived so very differently.

We go with our local friends to trendy bistros and sip fruit juice. There are oblique references to 'the situation', but a total avoidance of specifics. Perhaps, it's better this way. As we leave for home on a PIA flight, I feel like singing, '*Yeh dosti .... Kabhi nahi bhulengey ... Hari Om! Inshallah!*'

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Chinese on top of us, Pakis to the left of us. And now Bangladeshis, here, there and everywhere, pretending to be friendly Bongs from Kolkata. Oh, I forgot the Sri Lankans and our buddies in Nepal. All in all, India is gherao-ed by distinctly unfriendly neighbours sending out bad vibes. *Hindi Chini bhai bhai* sounds as corny a slogan today as it was fake

back then. God knows what Nehru was thinking when he clasped Chou En Lai to his bosom (well, almost!). Soon after that lovely little bhai bhai bonhomie, China attacked India. And the equation has never been the same again. **We can't (mustn't!) trust the Chinese. Just as they will never trust us. It is mutual. And it is inevitable. Though, when one thinks about it, if the Tiger mated with the Dragon, the world's DNA would alter irrevocably.**

Military might remains the only real might, regardless of what intellectuals believe. Together, China and India would be simply unbeatable—and the world knows as much. We ought to be natural allies, as co-Asians. It's an obvious alignment. For centuries, Chinese scholars came to India and went back to their land with tales of glory and riches. Philosophers, thinkers and travellers wrote glowing treatises on their experiences in Hindustan. Buddhism became India's most important export as millions of believers embraced its simple tenets. Despite this strong and inspiring foundation, the relationship between these two giants remained adversarial at best. We continue to compete instead of collaborating. This is short-sighted and far from smart. We could dominate world markets, if we combined forces.

But that's hardly likely. As things stand, there is frost in the air, and little else. At a formal luncheon hosted by the governor of Mumbai in his palatial Raj Bhavan, I found myself seated next to the Chinese ambassador—yes, the same diplomat who'd cheekily staked China's claim to

Arunachal Pradesh. He reeled off impressive statistics as to how many Indian companies were operating out of China. He also told me about the number of Chinese companies officially in India.

On the surface, he was polite and attentive. But the curtness and arrogance were definitely there, right under the carefully camouflaged surface. Sharp, articulate and urbane, he is the face of new China. Gone are the drab Mao suits, replaced by sharply-cut Western versions. Never mind the horror stories that emerge periodically from behind the Bamboo Curtain. China is keen to prove its progressiveness via spiffy methods that bear little connection to the old ways of getting things done. Chou and Mao have had their day. The Beijing Olympics are a clever construct to prove to the watching world that China is kosher. China rocks. Chances are, the Chinese will pull off the most spectacular Olympics in the long history of the games. It's all about scale and ambition. They got it—and they're dying to flaunt it.

**The Chinese have learned to flog anything and everything, in the best (worst?) capitalist spirit.** 'Gucci' could well be the most recognized name in China going by the prodigious number of Gucci fakes floating around. It's as if no other brand exists—or is worth faking. At every street corner in Shanghai, Beijing, even Xian, eager-faced Chinese counterfeiters resemble peculiar windmills as they flay over-laden arms bearing ten Gucci 'originals' each! The prices are shockingly low (Rs 200 for a smashing, hard-to-tell-from-the-original replica). Frankly, I was



sorely tempted. It wasn't an ethical/moral dilemma at all. But the knowledge that the recipients (my daughters!) would hoot with derision and refuse to carry Chinese fakes, deterred me.

I shamelessly went ahead and acquired a wallet (Fendi-fake) and shades (Louis Vuitton) from a huge supermarket across our hotel. There was nothing clandestine about this operation. The entire basement was one gigantic fakes heaven. Accessories, shoes, bags, belts, anything that could be duplicated—was! Those goods were freely displayed in licensed shops—just like in India! There we go again, I thought, as I scanned the racks for stuff that didn't look too obviously ersatz. I ended up buying a bright red suitcase which was vouched for by the enthusiastic salesgirl ('St-ll-oongg! Velly, velly stllong'). It came apart on its next voyage and had to be thrown away. But, what the hell. I had fun buying a st-llong, 'led'-coloured suitcase for 300 rupees! Nothing is designed to last in China—except, of course, the Great Wall.

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As I self-consciously wheeled it across an eight-lane road back to the hotel, the friendly doorman Ismail greeted me jauntily. Dressed deceptively to resemble a Sikh (complete with a turban), he responded cheerfully to my *Sat Sri Akal*, on my arrival. Turned out, Ismail was a Bombay Muslim who'd left his hometown twenty-eight years ago to work as a doorman in Beijing. No complaints, he stated. The tips were good. And had he no problems impersonating a Sardar? He grinned, '*Ki pharak penda, madamji?*' Like most other things in China, Ismail, too, was

a fake! A 'Gucci' Sardar!

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Back in Hong Kong, and later, in Bangkok, my heart refused to soar. I'd keep nudging my husband to hiss, 'Look at their airports. See the signage. It's so easy to get around. There are enough chairs to rest tired backsides. Clean loos. No stench. Efficient staff. Mercedes/BMW taxis. Why can't we have the same?' This was my lament throughout the trip.

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Come on ... one can argue that it's possible to achieve the impossible in China. After all, if a team of engineers falters, they can be taken to a quiet place and shot! No exaggeration. Cowering property developers are ordered to keep the lights on late into the night in all those hundreds of unoccupied apartments. 'They must look like people are living here,' one guide let on innocently. 'Who pays for the electricity? The state or the developer?' I asked. The guide hastily changed the subject and asked whether we were looking for 'Cheap cheap electronic items. Use and discard.' Everything is dispensable. Even lives. Human rights issues? How much? Come again? Freedom is such an alien concept in China, nobody bothers, for nobody knows! If a stubborn dweller refuses to vacate a plot earmarked for 'development', no problem. He is forcibly evicted and told to get lost. Entire neighbourhoods have been 'cleared' overnight by demolition squads to make way for 'improvements'! The average resident lives in abject

fear of waking up one morning to find the blood-red (and very dreaded) symbol for 'Demolition' (or Death?) painted on the building. Democracy is an outlandish idea, even to the young. The brain-washing is so thorough and total, it's impossible to have a normal conversation with anyone.

Our young guide, almost the same age as one of our daughters, widened her eyes when she overheard our conversation with Arundhati, who was in California at the time. 'You have allowed her to travel alone?' she asked in wonderment. It was an unthinkable dream for her. With most Internet sites successfully blocked, and only government-controlled media to disseminate 'news', the Chinese accept diktats and blatant untruths about the world. Worse, about themselves! They have zero idea what's happening beyond their backyard. It is only foreign residents of five-star hotels who have access to CNN and BBC. Books, magazines, movies ... nearly every known form of modern entertainment/communication is banned. But massage parlours flourish, à la Thailand. Though, in China, you get to keep your clothes on, even as heavily made-up nubile ladies clamber all over your body to reach those parts that need the most relaxation!

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## Easy money

An economy based on brazenly fudged numbers cannot sustain the charade for more than a few years. China pulled off a 'positioning' coup of sorts with its tall stories of

financial success. For a while, the world was fooled into believing that China was all set to wipe the floor with zillions in cash reserves and an economy that was galloping past its main rival—America—at a pace that was breathless. Most statistics were generated by the canny Chinese bosses themselves. Given the lack of access, these figures were hard to contest, and to all appearances, were accurate—till the *bhaanda* got broken by analysts who screamed ‘Fraud’.

302 China is scrambling frantically to regain lost ground, but that’s going to be tough, given the wary reactions from the investors who’d flocked there hoping to make a major killing, while the dollar floundered and took a serious beating in world markets. it looks like the Chinese Dream run is over, which is bad news, coming before its first official outing (Beijing Olympics 2008). No matter how strenuously the spin-masters work on creating new brand equity. Miss China was crowned Miss World, what do you know? While the lovely lass, Zhang Zilin, waved her delicate hand to acknowledge cheers from the crowd, she didn’t forget to spout the propagandist lines about the forthcoming Olympics! So much for mind control! Even beauty pageant winners aren’t spared. The indoctrination is thorough and complete! The timing of Zilin’s win was significant—and no coincidence. All those wins come with strategic tie-ups in place. Remember when Indian girls kept winning international titles, year after year? What happened? Dozens of luxury brands, cosmetic products and related consumerware found a ready (and huge) base in India. The same will happen in China—the floodgates

have been thrown open. L'Oréal, Lancôme, La Prairie and others—rejoice! **Chinese chicks will buy the lot—hand creams, face creams, butt creams. Chinese women will all want to be Zhang Zilin.**

### Opiate of the masses

Is this the best way for the West to strike back? Maybe. Corrupt the youth of China. Use Levi's like opium. Drug the kids with brands. And then see what happens to the Proletariat Dream. I met a European power broker, the day Zilin won her crown. He was exultant as he discussed the enormous commercial potential of dumping Western products in the 1.3 billion-strong Chinese market. He was boastful and sneering in his assessment. I laughed silently at his pomposity. The Chinese are by far the shrewdest people in the universe. This is their time. They have waited for it over decades of being treated badly. The man snorted at my mild argument and said, 'I was with the top Politburo members last week. Let me tell you, the Chinese are not obsessed by India the way India is obsessed by China.' I wanted to reply, 'You arrogant idiot! Like those sharks are going to reveal their obsession to you.' We in Asia are masters at playing 'Inscrutable', when it suits us. Right now, the Chinese want to fix America and they'll do so using economic stealth to destabilize US markets. The Chinese have a one-point programme at present: to dominate the world. In order to achieve this objective, they have to first

dominate America. The story of Chinese sub-standard goods being rejected by the West is a story of wishful thinking. But also, it is a story of how incredibly cunning the Chinese are. We talk of attractive investment opportunities in China and compare the returns with what India offers. The major difference lies in comparative transparency. **Doors do not open in China unless an investor joins a local coterie.** It used to be the same in India twenty years ago when the Licence Raj held us back from surging ahead. Fortunately a few smart politicians woke up to the shortsightedness of such an approach and scrapped those killer speed-breakers to progress.

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Beijing can stage a phenomenal Olympics and outdazzle Sydney (Australia is one country that brilliantly used the Games to reposition its international image) but it's likely to be all *dikhaawa*, as we say. Indians tend to borrow heavily while staging impressive weddings. Behind the grand show, the story is one of debt and little else. Neighbours know the truth but turn up to selfishly enjoy themselves at the banquet.

The Chinese will put up a spectacular show, no doubt. But what happens after the last athlete flies off? We'll find out soon enough! More importantly, how'll the Chinese youth go back to their 'No news is good news' existence once they discover the big, bad world outside—first-hand? No matter how closely they are watched by the secret police, they will meet and talk to the visitors from across the world. What then? Will they still be happy with the latest designer jeans and perfumes? Will 'The Devil Wears

Prada' approach lull them into a familiar stupor? Or will they discover the heady taste of freedom? True freedom, as enjoyed by the rest? Will Western-style freedom replace designer denim as the most desired thing in life? Will the Chinese discover the difference between great fakes and the real thing? Will they make the all-important connect? A society that thrives on sub-standard goods fosters sub-standard lives. Nobody ever goes to the top selling shoddy, third-rate products and short-changing the customers. Will the Chinese ever discover a precious commodity called Trust?

A Belgian businessman who has made Beijing his home took us around his neighbourhood, pointing out several tracts and ramshackle buildings that are to be razed, since the area is far too close to the Forbidden City and likely to be spotted by tourists to the Beijing Olympics. 'Where will these people go?' I asked. He shrugged before adding, 'Out of the city limits, that's for sure.' 'No question of fair compensation? No alternative housing?' He smiled, 'This is China, not Europe, not America, not even India.' I suddenly wanted to start singing, 'Yeh mera India ... I love my India!'

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Bangkok gleams with sleaze—and that's its USP. I don't know of any other city where sex is sold as blatantly. One can hardly take a step without being accosted by touts offering highly niche, very specialized sexual 'treats'. It's possible to demand a transsexual dwarf with blue eyes and

superstar india

red hair, and have the pimp promptly nod with an upbeat 'Can do ... can do ... how much you pay?'

All this is fine, but having a wallet pinched in a gigantic mall is not fun. When that happened to me, I rushed to register the theft with the security desk. A polite female officer was busy consoling a hijab-wearing lady whose bag had been snatched. When it came to my complaint, the officer told me calmly that the pickpocket must have stripped the wallet of credit cards and cash before throwing it into a trashcan. That's exactly where it was found. And I was expected to be impressed/grateful. 'Madam, it happened to the prime minister's wife last week! And her bag was never found,' the officer told me, a little curtly, this time. A big consolation in her book, but a huge inconvenience in mine. To add insult to injury, her chamcha-lieutenant added, 'India same-same.' He was right, of course. India very much same-same. Visitors to Mumbai/Delhi/Kolkata or any tourist destination in the country have similar stories.

**Poverty is trotted out as the official excuse. But I refuse to buy that theory. This is to say that every poor person is a potential pickpocket. Not true. It is something else ... and it troubles me.** Farmers in Maharashtra's Vidharbha district have been committing suicide, unable to pay off small debts. They were not pickpockets. They didn't beg. And they certainly didn't steal. The cities that tolerate, even encourage, pickpockets are cities generally run by corrupt officials, who in turn report to corrupt political bosses. It's a food chain that's



hard to break. Everybody is, in some way, part of the rot. So, who is left to stem it?

India's rating in the list of the World's Most Corrupt Countries fluctuates each year. But its place in the Top Ten is guaranteed! **Corruption continues to be India's numero uno speed-breaker. And yet, it seems like an invincible, indestructible ogre nobody is willing to take on.** India boasts of some of the world's smartest bureaucrats. It's hard to top the young officers who emerge from Mussoorie's prestigious Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration. Just 310 candidates qualified for the 81<sup>st</sup> Foundation Course in 2007. These IAS, IPS, IFS, IFOS, IRS, etc. represent the *crème de la crème* of India's academics. The competitive examination attracts students in the thousands, and is considered one of the toughest exams to clear in the world. If one talks to any bureaucrat who has emerged from this crack academy, it becomes instantly clear just how rigorous the training has been. What happens to the same people when they actually run India? Where do those early ideals disappear? When does the 'C-word' (compromise) get into the picture? What makes them succumb?

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For the past few months, the media has carried quite a few stories involving venal police and revenue officers, besides district collectors and others with equally greasy palms. The average citizen has become completely numb to such stories now. There is no horror, outrage or even anger. One reads reports and flips the pages or switches channels. Corruption has become totally institutionalized

—a part of the system. It is ‘news’ if one comes across a person who has turned *down* a juicy bribe. And sadly enough, people laugh at such a person. The scorn has to do with cynicism of the worst kind. ‘*Arrey—pagal hai kya?*’ is the immediate response. Commercial cinema, always the first to reflect popular sentiments, adds to the apathy by depicting stereotypically corrupt babudom in movie after movie. Cops-on-the-take, politico-rapists, gangster-minister nexuses form the staple of films that claim to reflect the common man’s concerns. Unfortunately, this has not led to a demand for more transparency or even a widespread clean-up.

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On the contrary, people shrug indifferently and conclude nothing is going to change since the *netas* are uniformly tainted and rapaciously greedy, particularly those with megabucks—the same bucks that are recycled during elections to fund vote banks in the sprawling urban slums surrounding the poshest localities in the metros. Canny, often illiterate, slum-dwellers display remarkably savvy negotiating skills when the politicians or their agents come a-calling. Overnight, these filthy tracts of shanty-land are given municipal water, electricity and most importantly, legitimacy. Identity papers are promptly issued to dubious characters of no known origin. Armed with these, they can’t be dislodged by any power on earth. Once entrenched, they are there to stay. Whether or not they end up casting their precious votes for the benefactor remains a mystery even to the neta, whose touts have worked tirelessly with those folks for months.

But with promises given of more 'development' to follow the candidate's win, slum-dwellers turn up in the thousands on voting day. They queue alongside the *barra saabs* of the area (Anil Ambani shows up early and takes his place beside a group of ragpickers from nearby Moorthi Nagar, at the Cuffe Parade voting booth close to where I live). Press photographers go ga-ga shooting the mighty with the lumpen, their pix appearing with front-page headlines like, 'Democracy Thrives: Tycoons and Tangawallahs Vote Together.' But the shabby state of those slums degenerates further, despite the influx of vote bank funds. Token raids are conducted periodically to flush out potential trouble-makers, especially immigrants from Bangladesh. But nothing of consequence is achieved, even as everyone in the area discusses how these slums are acting as hotbeds of terrorism by harbouring anti-social elements from neighbouring countries. Token demolitions take place, too, with a battery of lensmen recording the proceedings. Women with naked infants on the hip wail on cue, while the menfolk make belligerent gestures into the rapidly-clicking cameras. It is quite a performance, for everybody is a part of the act, the cops included. It's a well-written script replete with clichés. The chief minister mews the next day that all the displaced will be provided with alternate housing. A week later, the 'displaced' are busy brazenly rebuilding their demolished homes. **It's back to business. As usual.**

## Corruption Corrodes

And total corruption corrodes totally. Corruption rules! We *expect* and *accept* corruption. To me, it's the saddest aspect of our lives. We no longer fight something that is obviously all-pervasive. It has gone beyond mere resignation. Even young kids talk lightly about giving fifty bucks to a cop if caught dodging a traffic light. They see their parents greasing palms and bribing their way through the trickiest, or worse, the simplest situations! When in doubt—bribe! That's the awful message.

310 Talk to the young and they exclaim, 'But everybody does it!' The popular belief is that there's nothing that can't be 'fixed' if you know which person to buy over. India is a land of very adhesive palms! Have money, will *khilao paisa*.

Kids think little of 'tipping' drivers to keep their mouth shut when the babalog want to take Pappaji's gaddi for a spin! Underage, drunken drivers take many lives in our cities—and get away with it. A brash bloke in Mumbai called Pereira ran over some people in Bandra and was let off initially by cops who'd 'fixed' the case neatly. It was only public outrage that finally worked. But, as Bandra residents often pinpoint, if a Salman Khan is still out there, having the best time of his life, and if the 'Nanda Boy' notorious for the BMW-case killings, is getting richer and chubbier with each passing year—who really gives a damn about justice? Let's ask Sanjay Dutt!

The rich are better insulated, better protected. They are seen as being above and beyond the law—it's their

prerogative. It's of little comfort to be told the system is no different in Brazil. Or Thailand. Who cares? The system sucks! Nobody believes our billionaires could have made their big bucks without bending rules and bribing government officials.

Isn't that sad? No wonder the rich continue to generate hostility, envy. They may be regarded as icons of today's India. Our romance with a capitalistic economy may ensure their presence on Power Lists drawn up by equally corrupt media houses looking for their advertising support. But the average Indian remains suspicious. India has 53 'official' billionaires. Hurrah! But take a look at another statistic: The wealth of India's super rich equals 31 per cent of our GDP! Russia with 87 billionaires beats us to it, with their wealth representing 36 per cent of the GDP.

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Scary.

As my father used to say, 'What is happening to the country? Most unfortunate ... most unfortunate ...' This is a story that's replicated all over India in some form or the other. It is one story that makes me long for China and the Chinese way of sorting out similar issues! On a more serious level, unless the nexus between politicians, slum lords, underworld bosses and the powerful builders' lobby is broken (fat chance!), we shall have to endure these periodic onslaughts and stay mum, since nobody is interested enough to address the root cause of the situation.

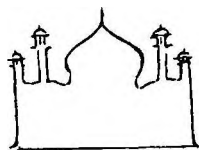
'Most unfortunate' could well be the refrain of anybody who has had a *takkar* with babudom. Not a day goes by without some reference to corruption in high places. And

yet, the same rascals are fawned over by society at large. Mumbai, which for decades has dealt with gang wars and organized crime, is now coming to grips with the latest phenomenon—members of the same family turning their guns on one another, generally over property disputes. Sons shoot old mothers who refuse to die on schedule. Brothers shoot brothers who aren't being 'co-operative', and sons-in-law hire killers to browbeat their wives' kith-and-kin—again, over a piece of real estate. There seem to be many Pravin Mahajans in our midst all of a sudden. And a lot of trigger-happy individuals going around settling scores themselves, unlike in the old days when, for a measly sum of five thousand rupees, one could hire a *supari* killer to do the dirty work.

All these developments suggest India is not exactly the peace-loving, non-violent nation it is projected to be. Never was, actually. But it is a favourite myth that is frequently trotted out by politicians of any and every hue, when the nation is deemed to be in a suitably pious frame of mind, and in need of a quick *shanti* fix. It's pretty easy to manipulate the gullible, if those who so decide use the services of smart image-fixers.

Fortunately, irreverence is not completely dead so far, as is evident from the audacious skits, take-offs and comedy shows ruling television of late. Nobody is spared—from Manmohan Singh and Sonia Gandhi to Sachin Tendulkar and Amitabh Bachchan. One has to hand it to the creative brains who come up with the hilarious lines and gags that lampoon just about anybody who asks for it. My personal

favourite is Laloo Prasad Yadav's alter-ego, who has mastered the wily fox of a politician's specific Bihari accent, and goes to town with Laloo impersonations. Given Laloo's distinct thatch of white hair, and his alarming lack of self-consciousness (which other pot-bellied politico would bathe in front of cameras wearing nothing more modest than a diaphanous dhoti?), Laloo is a natural for send-ups. But the popularity of these shows displays something important—India's readiness to laugh at itself and to take such shows in its stride, without hyperventilating. This wouldn't have happened even five years ago, when the high and mighty bristled at the mildest criticism and demanded elaborate apologies—or else!







‘Has Anyone  
Seen a  
Policeman?  
Anyone?’



Despite the new 'openness', bureaucratic bungling and plain stupidity still dominate routine procedures. I have been to the cop station at least three times for a standard passport verification. Due to clerical errors, my youngest daughter's name (Anandita) was misspelt on her ration card. The cops put me through the entire drill, recounting at length how a top cop's son was not allowed to leave the country because his initials were scrambled up in a key document. He was forced to give up a seat in an American medical school on account of this clerical goof-up, but the authorities remained unmoved and unrelenting, all because of a wrongly typed initial. How was I meant to react to the story? With applause?

While I cooled my heels at the cop station, I watched newly-arrested pickpockets being produced in front of a surly, burly officer. Handcuffed and sporting hangdog expressions, the men were roughly pushed into temporary cells at the back of the station. 'We round up anti-social elements before any major festival,' the cop-in-charge informed me cheerfully. 'Where are the women officers

who used to handle the help line and the special women's cell?' I asked. The man smiled, 'We do it ourselves these days. The men in the slum close by come home drunk every evening and beat up their wives, who rush to the station and create a scene. If we were to spend all our time sorting out domestic quarrels ...'

Then he went on to tell me despairingly that our teeming megapolises were alarmingly short of numbers when it came to the police force. 'The shortfall is as high as 35 per cent,' he said, as a beat cop waited his turn to ask about the number of revolvers/holsters available in case of trouble (it was the eve of Ganpati Utsav, Mumbai's most important Hindu festival).

318 'Are you expecting trouble?' I asked the big boss. He shrugged, 'Look at those slums across the street—anything can happen, with these people. We've tried to track the movements within the bustee, but often even our plainclothesmen find it difficult to penetrate those congested gallis. The special thing about this particular *chowki* is the contrast—the richest and poorest people in India live within a one-mile radius.'

We could hear cries of '*Ganpatibappa, Morya*,' from the busy, narrow street outside. Worshippers were bringing their beloved deity home, on handcarts and trucks. Smaller images were cradled like infants in strong arms, as the processionists headed towards hovels precariously perched above open drains. The bustee was strung with fairy lights as improvised stalls spilt over right onto the overcrowded road. It was going to be a busy ten days for

the cops. But they seemed geared for the demanding job ahead.

A soft-spoken, grey-haired senior cop told me about a training programme he'd attended in Yugoslavia. 'There are great systems in place there—the minute the population of any precinct goes up by 1,000, an additional cop is put on the beat to take care of the extra numbers. Collective decisions are taken at all levels. Civic administrators work closely with the police, and pass orders really fast when there is a community issue involved. It's exactly the reverse here. We spend most of our time in wrangles with vested interests, mainly stooges of political bosses. A brand-new concrete, unauthorized road has come up in that slum across our *chowki*. The orders came from Delhi. There was nothing we could do ...'

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His frustration is entirely understandable. It is not as if there are no good men left in our police force. But the few who hang in there eventually give up the fight and merely discharge their duties like automatons. The dreaded word, 'Delhi', makes most bureaucrats shut up and change the topic. **'Delhi' itself has become a Medusa-like creature. A hydra-headed monster, to boot. Delhi is a sinister destination that remote-controls the rest of India.** Those who live there by choice have their reputations tainted by outsiders who refuse to trust them. Everybody is supposed to be on the take. Everybody is on some shadowy politician's payroll. Delhi is a symbol of the corruption and rot that have destroyed the image of India. Today, it's impossible to demand transparency, basic honesty

from *sarkari* babus anywhere, for they all have a convenient alibi—Delhi.

‘People in the capital talk with their guns,’ commented a retired army officer, while reading a report on yet another shoot-out. ‘Citizens are supposed to register their weapons at the nearest police station. But nobody does it,’ he added. ‘Delhi is becoming a lawless, frightening city,’ shuddered a resident of Gurgaon, pointing out the manner in which trigger-happy youngsters threaten neighbours and unwary motorists. Women professionals from other metros hate going to Delhi for this very reason. ‘The streets are dimly-lit and deserted. There is hardly any public transport. Gangs of men stalk any woman they can locate, making lewd comments and frequently molesting her in public view. Nobody protests, since one never knows whether guns come into play in such a scenario.’

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Delhi is notorious for such shoot-outs. Often, the villains are sons of senior bureaucrats or prominent politicians. They are smug and certain in their knowledge that nothing will happen to them, even if a police case gets registered. All evidence can be easily manipulated or destroyed. And eye-witnesses are easy to buy over. Files go missing and mysterious disappearances of individuals linked to the crime are not unknown. As a result, nobody wants to get involved. We, in Mumbai, used to feel somewhat superior in this regard, and brag about how terrific this city is for women professionals commuting on local trains after a late-night shift. Or even girl gangs going out for a night on the town. Till five years ago, this was

largely true. But illegal guns are beginning to surface in Mumbai, too, much to the consternation of concerned parents of young daughters (me!). Again, cops insist it's a social problem that must be addressed by society at large. They confirmed that there were far many more unlicensed guns in the city these days, but didn't see it as a major issue.

Even though I am entirely pro-free movement, and condemn balkanization of any kind, maybe Raj Thackeray had a point. Pity he didn't make it convincingly enough. In the bargain, he triggered off a national debate on 'outsiders in our midst'. Raj became a hero in the eyes of his supporters but a villain for the rest of India. 'Dogs and outsiders not allowed', is a commonly spotted sign outside fancy housing societies. Soon, Mumbai itself might have to erect one—that is, if the metropolis doesn't implode before that happens. As for Raj—he has made it. In marketing parlance, this sort of a phenomenon is described as 'brand recognition'. **The use of the word 'outsiders' has radically changed the delicate equation between the 'real' Marathi *manoos* and those who throng to Mumbai in search of jobs.**

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Take the small example of co-operative building societies that employ private security guards to look after the safety of residents. Police insist office-bearers do not co-operate when it comes to registering these guards. Security agencies are expected to acquire licences before operating their business. Most agencies don't bother to. Just as they don't care who gets employed. Antecedents are rarely checked. Employees manage to squeeze in

relatives from villages back home. These young men arrive in Mumbai and are instantly hired by careless employers looking for cheap labour. No verification is done, as these illiterate villagers in their early twenties are shoved into uniforms and posted at posh buildings. With no training and zero exposure to life in a big city, these 'security' men are incapable of defending themselves against an energetic dog, forget burglars. They are the first to run away at any sign of trouble. They admit they are ignorant, scared, hungry and sleep-deprived. Employers make them put their thumb prints on salary slips that say they're being paid 10,000 rupees a month. But what they're given is a paltry 1,000. The rest is pocketed by the owner of the agency. Unable to survive on such a miserable amount, these poor chaps end up doing two shifts a day, in different buildings. Living in squalid conditions, with no sleep and very little food, they grow unfit and pose an actual threat to residents, especially during an emergency. They don't know the language or the names of anybody residing in the apartment block. Worse, they are in a state of shock when faced with the vast cultural differences they encounter in Mumbai.

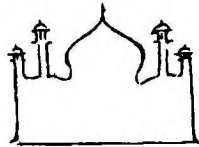
I frequently look at their stupefied expressions as PYTs troop into the elevator clad in skimpy, Britney Spears gear. Very often, these nymphets are sozzled and falling over equally sozzled boyfriends. Frequently, they stub out cigarettes hastily before getting into the lift. Their language is affectionately abusive and sprinkled with four-letter words. Their parents get in at about the same time, dressed similarly and in an identically hammered state. Women



drip diamonds and the men flash fancy watches as they emerge from Baby Bentleys or Lamborghinis which cost as much as the reconstruction of an entire village back in Bihar. The awestruck liftmen can't stop staring at these incredible sights. **Sometimes, memsaabs take offence and ask belligerently, 'Kya dekh raha hai?'** **The man should reply, 'Tamasha'.** But doesn't. He instantly lowers his eyes, folds his hands and apologizes. *For being shocked?*

These disparities are indeed shocking. A savvy wealth manager from a sharp financial company told me India's money no longer forms a pyramid, with a wide, largely poor base, narrowing to a sharp tip made up of the rich and super-rich. Rather, it resembles a diamond—a prosperous middle class occupying the wide, middle space, with the mega rich and mega poor at opposite ends. This, he pointed out, is a sign of a very healthy economy. At the same time, India-watchers never fail to highlight the disparities, and it comes as no surprise that a recent BBC survey threw up clichés about India being a country of elephants, snake charmers, the Taj Mahal—and poverty. Abject poverty. It is something that hits foreigners as soon as they land. They just have to move outside the charmed circles of the metros for the contrasts to become more acute. Pockets of prosperity and enormous wealth co-exist with subhuman living conditions. There are thousands of villagers across India who are so backward that the discovery of electricity remains unknown to these inhabitants of huts which are lit by oil lamps and where food is cooked on wood fires. This

is the 'other' India. To most outsiders, also, the 'Only India', or the 'Real India'. It's impossible for them to reconcile the differences or come to terms with the irony of the present situation. India is indisputably in the big league today. It is a superpower. It can so easily use that position to implement sweeping change where change is most needed—in the villages. But, as the resigned cop at the police chowki rightly said, 'Why should the politicians bother to educate the masses? These slums will keep growing. We live in a "Note for Vote" country. Education remains the last priority. Illiterate and poor people are easier to control.'



Who's afraid  
of Mayawati?  
Well ...  
nearly everyone.



I remember, around three years ago, saying (half-jokingly) to a self-styled intellectual at a dinner party that I was sure Mayawati was India's future. I also said she'd be prime minister someday. The man had spluttered into his whisky tumbler and stated vehemently that I was way off the mark. 'Bullshit,' he kept saying over and over again. Well, the future is here. And surprise, surprise so is Mayawati! This time she's here to stay. Mayawati ain't going anywhere. If we don't get used to the idea of a future that features her, we'll be kidding ourselves.

There are those skeptics who believe Mayawati is the worst thing to happen to India. They are the ones still clinging to the Nehruvian photocopy image of good-looking leaders, speaking impeccable English with the right Oxbridge accent, clad in expensive-to-maintain khadi, addressing the unwashed, toiling masses from a distant podium, with a cowering minion holding a gigantic umbrella to protect the neta from the harsh rays of the Indian sun. This lot cannot accept a Mayawati—crude,

coarse, badly-dressed, and guilty of the worst crime of all—not speaking the Queen’s English. Oh, my God! Can such a person be a national leader?

Don’t be ridiculous!

What would Mayawati say to a Gordon Brown if she ever made it to 10 Downing Street? Would Sarkozy break baguettes with her? And Merkel—heavens—imagine Mayawati at the Oktober Fest waving a tankard of Bavarian beer with her! Does she know Western table manners? Mayawati would be a huge embarrassment for this new, glamorous and glittering India ‘we’ are so proud of. But guess what? Mayawati it will be who’ll one day occupy 10 Janpath (or its equivalent), and entertain visiting heads of state. It is they who shall have to get used to hospitality desi-style. Mayawati may progress from wearing pink polyester salwar kameezes to crepe de chine ‘designer’ outfits from Lajpat Nagar, but she will never be ‘one of us’. One can almost hear Ambika Soni sniffing in derision.

Well, the rest of India—the ‘real’ India, as it has been classified, has been waiting for a Mayawati for sixty years. It wasn’t about gender, unlike in America. It was about a person capable of galvanizing the masses and launching a movement. Mayawati is like a Martin Luther King with his ‘I have a dream’ and black pride. He changed things forever. Today, one can hear polite but essentially superficial opinion-makers in posh drawing rooms across India holding forth in chi-chi accents about the Neo-Dalits. ‘Some of them are *really* intelligent,’ a woman told me at an awards ceremony, her voice lowered suitably and her expression one of

pleasant excitement at a major discovery ('Beluga goes great with *aapams*—really!'). I'm sure Mayawati is acutely aware of this sort of condescension. She's smart enough to turn it around and flog her detractors with it. A young politician with heavily kohl-lined eyes pointed out in awe-struck tones, 'That woman is too much ... she has spread her tentacles everywhere. All the neighbouring states are being infiltrated by her men.'

Is the writing on the wall? I would say so. Businessmen who've interacted with Mayawati in the past talk about her in admiring tones.

Especially one industrialist who was looking for mucho favours and had gone allegedly prepared with suitcases stashed with cash. He was granted an

Businessmen  
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tones

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audience after a longish interval (part of a strategy she shares with Sonia—keep 'em waiting, keep 'em sweating). What he wasn't ready for was the unusual venue (Mayawati's bedroom!), and madam's attire (a fluorescent pink nightie). Oh, the bizarre doesn't end here. She was mid-facial and most un-self-conscious about the face pack that made her resemble a ghoul. Madam was ready to talk! Years after that encounter, the man recalls the short meeting with a note of reluctant respect. 'She's tough, ruthless and efficient. She knows what she's doing ...' No argument, there.

It's coming to a point where one does not dare utter 'D'

for 'Dalit', for fear of being arrested. It's like the 'n' word for 'nigger'.

330 The exaggerated reaction to a lyric in a film (*Aaja Nachle*) led to a ban. it was an innocuous-sounding line about a mochi who becomes a goldsmith. But so violent was the backlash to the perceived 'insult' that the producer (Yashraj Films) was forced to apologize and delete the reference. Mayawati's *dadagiri* takes care of all issues (big and small) that trouble her followers. But Mayawati has also established the fact that she is no maverick flirting with the system. Political pundits are certain she has her eyes on the kursi (the PM's position) and will work towards that goal aggressively. Should she succeed through a complicated manoeuvre involving the numbers game in coalition politics, she will send shock-waves through not just India but the watching world. Corporate India, in particular, is monitoring Mayawati most closely, since it is believed her ascent to even greater power will adversely affect the Dazzling India story. 'Mayawati will set us back by twenty years,' a businessman grumbled. Another one interjected more optimistically, 'Don't worry, yaar. She is too smart. She will not interfere. She knows her success depends on pushing for growth and keeping up the current momentum. She may fix her enemies and rivals—but not at the cost of progress.'

If India indeed has a 'Mayawati honeymoon' on the cards, it may not be such a bad thing. A fire-breathing dragon lady entirely in touch with the *aam janata* may come as a welcome change from the sabjanta World Bankwallahs,



who, some fear, have sold Indian interests to American cronies—cleverly camouflaged, of course. Besides, if Mayawati's reign turns out to be short and far-from-sweet, it will pave the way for the emperor-in'-waiting, Rahul Gandhi. That Rahul is being groomed for the family business is obvious enough. Regardless of his ability or reluctance, Rahul is the anointed one. Indians believe that the fourth generation is the tricky one. Decline sets in by the third, while the fourth finishes off the job! Tracking Rahul will be a fascinating exercise for political analysts. As of now, Rahul looks all set to glide into history books—a dimpled prince with a penchant for faux pas. But seriously cute, nevertheless!

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It can be fun, too

There are any number of pretenders ready to define themselves as Dalits these days in order to take advantage of the prevailing situation. A young painter confessed he'd fudged his caste in order to secure admission into a prestigious college. 'It was my father's decision. He thought it would be easier to educate all his children by playing the SC/ST card.' Did he regret the fraud? 'Not at all ... for my generation, all these things don't really matter. **Whether I'm described as a Brahmin, Kshatriya or Dalit, as long as I'm good at what I do, that's what counts.**'

A young friend of my daughter declined lunch saying she was observing Ramzan (her mother is Muslim). This

was her first fast and she seemed determined to keep it, 'Nothing to do with religion. I'm testing myself,' she explained while she watched us enjoy our meal albeit guiltily! Caste may not be a big issue in urban India. Religious differences may be blurring, but even those who cling to age-old prejudices are aware of how shrewdly politicians manipulate both—the conformists and those who ignore such differences. 'Either way, you are made to feel bad by one or the other faction,' said a friend. At the same time, in a city like Mumbai, what one witnesses over and over again is the increasing irrelevance of both. While attending a Ganapati aarti at a friend's home, I looked around idly at the worshippers participating in the ritual. Most were neighbours belonging to different religious streams. A Parsee lady had done the elaborate *rangoli* at the entrance, while Muslim business associates joined in when we all chorused 'Ganpati Bappa, Morye ...' Later, as we sat around chatting informally over samosas and chai, we could've been one big happy family—exactly as I recall my own childhood, growing up in a multi-religious, multi-cultured apartment block, where Diwali was celebrated with as much enthusiasm as Id. I find it hard to believe all those sentiments have vanished in the intervening years. The character of a city has more staying power and endurance than that, surely? Yes, Mumbai has been devastated, and attempts to divide or polarize it further still continue. As they do, elsewhere in the country. But what puzzles me is if India's youth remains indifferent to these issues and middle-aged India is too tired of being pushed around to

suit the shifting agendas of the parties in power—who is involved in furthering the divide? Who cares?

The ageing population has no voice to speak of. Senior citizens are far more preoccupied with issues that impact their lives directly, like being abandoned by their families, to bother with the caste or sub-caste of their neighbours.

**The middle class wants to make money—not war.**

Women want to get ahead in their careers at all costs. The upper classes have always played ball with whosoever best serves their financial interests. The answer to the question of ‘Who cares?’ is obvious—it’s the poor of India. The weakest and most vulnerable of all. It is these suppressed-for-centuries individuals who are being seduced by irresponsible, disingenuous promises made by politicians only interested in hanging on to their precarious power. The old ‘Garibi Hatao’ slogan fooled an earlier generation, lulled them into believing the Congress party would do something for them. Nothing was done. They remained where they were, eking out a miserable existence on land that was too exhausted itself to feed them. They are still exactly in the same spot—except that their children are no longer prepared to toil in those parched fields. These restless, frustrated children are perfect recruits for those intent on causing trouble. Lured to the big cities with even bigger promises of prosperity and the good life, they leave home, never to return. Struggle is not new to them. Neither is starvation. Once holed up in ratty tin shacks, they become soft targets for agents in search of helpless youth, willing to try anything in order to survive—smuggling, drugs,

prostitution, kidnapping, extortion—and that final, most terrifying option—terrorism. Uneducated, easy-to-influence, these wild-eyed strangers travel vast distances to get a shot at a better life, far away from the wretchedness back home. Once they arrive, they never leave. As it's marvellously put in Bambaiya lingo, 'Setting *ho gaya hai*, boss. *Aapun idharrich rahega*.'

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Each time I look at Mumbai's Stock Exchange building (bombed during the blasts of 1993), I am filled with contradictory feelings—of revulsion, fascination, awe and hatred. Is it really the Tower of Evil that controls our lives in ways we cannot quite fathom? Or is it the Tower of Hope, that symbolizes the New India with its amazing GDP? Are we deluding ourselves that as long as the Sensex climbs and the financial world remains bullish about the India story, all will be well and one day we shall wake up to a bright new dawn which will finally herald the Golden Age we've been dreaming about—promised? Will a twenty-first-century messiah emerge out of nowhere and lead the flock from despair to redemption? Are we really that gullible? Is it going to happen now? Ten years later? Twenty years later? Never?

The building itself is not all that impressive. And if you walk around the area, you'll certainly not experience a buzzy, upbeat feeling that says, 'Oh wow! Aren't we on a roll?' Dalal Street is overcrowded, dirty, shabby and

indistinguishable from any other narrow street in Mumbai. The few Raj-era stone buildings that remain in the area could do with a major clean-up. The others are more 'modern' (read: ghastly) and badly kept, like most buildings in Mumbai. There are roadside sandwich-sellers and hand-cart-owners doing brisk business selling Mumbai's number one snack—*vada pau*. Oh, enterprising cooks also stir-fry mixed veggies in gigantic woks and sell them with greasy noodles. 'Manchurian' cuisine was perhaps invented on these pavements! *Ice-golas* in summer, home-made *kulfis*, *limbu-paani*, *idli-dosas* and a terrific assortment of tongue-tickling munchies, make this area a foodie heaven for the hundreds of *dalals* milling around, trading stocks, exchanging market gossip and chasing an elusive, get-rich-quick dream. Beer bars, seafood restaurants, biryani places, Parsee eateries, and numerous stationery stores ensure a packed locality during business hours. Dominating this nearly inaccessible street (with elaborate police barricades after the 1993 blasts), stands the mighty Stock Exchange building, once the nerve centre of India's economy, but rivalled today by its newer, swankier cousin in a spanking new district which resembles a James Bond set.

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Strange. Even though I grew up within a five-mile radius of the edifice, I was not really aware of its existence. I hadn't noticed it till years and years later, when I was left a few shares of Hindustan Lever and didn't know what to do with them! Till that point, I had never seen a share certificate (pre-demat, pre-electronic transaction days), and stared at the elaborate sheets of paper for a long, long time.

I'm almost certain my father didn't know what these certs looked like either. For him (and therefore, me!), the share bazaar was a wicked place meant for people who indulged in *satta*. Gambling was the next, most awful sin, after whoring. Dalals were no better than pimps and touts out to loot the unwary and cheat the innocent who trusted them with their hard-earned money. Dalals looted widows and misled young men by promising them overnight riches. This thought was so deeply entrenched in my mind, I suspected anyone who played the market. It seemed like a really dodgy way to make money. Aaha. That is till I asked someone the value of those parched-with-age sheets. The amount was modest, but I have to confess, it was a thrill to discover I could actually make some money trading in the papers. It seeming easy and attractive. I cashed out at the right time, and that money really helped finance a worthy cause. That's when I started to take an interest in bazaar info.

Soon, I found myself with a bright and beautiful young lady called Sapna (what an appropriate name for someone who offers dreams to clients!) who was supposed to hold my hand and help me manage my resources more efficiently. This is a very parochial, narrow-minded and bigoted thing to say, but the reason I went along with her may have had a lot to do with her wonderful personality (it inspires trust and confidence), but even more with the fact that, like me, she too was a Maharashtrian. We both laughed at this, since Maharashtrians are known to be the least competent when it comes to money matters. And here

she was, a highly respected whiz in her field, initiating a duffer like me into the complexities of financial structuring. I still don't know the difference between debt and equity funds. But the good thing is, I don't need to—I know I'm in conservative, cautious hands. No hot stocks for me. Slow and steady goes it, regardless of which high the Sensex hits. Or whether a market correction is on the cards.

**My father would've been surprised at my 'greed', as he would put it.** He saw this entire bulls-and-bears game differently, as people of that era did. 'Money for nothing,' was his reaction when told about someone making a killing during a rally. Which explains why I feel a little guilty, a little sheepish, each time I find myself gloating over a stock in my portfolio that has surprised everyone by actually outperforming the Sensex. Talking to Sapna, my earnest friend, I've picked up a few key phrases, which I throw around knowledgeably as and when India's 'Booming Economy' is mentioned. In fact, at a dinner following the Frankfurt Book Fair in 2006, a stuffy German banker, who was holding forth on global financing, was just asking for it—I spoke with such convincing authority on the upside of India's growth potential over the next twenty years, he actually asked me whether I was a banker in my day job! That's called the power of BS. It's always tempting to educate those foreigners who express their wonderment at India's 'amazing progress'. Even though there are times when we too are equally wonderstruck at this incredible turnaround in our economy, my attitude is

to shrug nonchalantly, as if to say, look at us ... we are doing great. The boom is not some kind of a freak-trick. Our GDP figures haven't been pulled out of a magician's hat, we have worked sixty long years to get to this place. For us, our current achievements are not a matter of surprise. Excuse me, it's the most expected boom—so why are you guys making such a big deal out of it? That stumps the cynics, who are used to Indians themselves joining the chorus and agreeing with them that the present scenario is nothing less than a miracle.

338 When a young woman in London was fired from her job for sporting a nose-ring, Britain went into a tizzy trying to drum up a huge controversy over her dismissal. **The average Joe on the street was quizzed about India and its position in the world today. Most interviewees were totally ignorant and continued to identify 'Asians', as one big brown blob,** cooking curries and working as janitors at Heathrow. Pakistanis and Indians were clubbed together, along with Bangladeshis and Sri Lankans. The fact that thirty years from now, there will be more Asians across Britain, with whites becoming a minority, has still to hit home.

Ditto, for a survey in America, which revealed similar perceptions. India? Oh yeah—elephants, IT-guys, motels and cab drivers. That was it!

What this clearly indicates is a huge big gap in India's efforts at projecting itself worldwide. I keep coming back to this distressing lacuna because I'm pained to confront stereotypes and clichés in an age where we should be well



on our way to asserting a fresh, modern identity that matches our potential and ambition. While camels, snakes, bullock-carts and begging bowls undoubtedly provide better photo ops, isn't it tragic that we have ourselves done very little to move beyond images that have been recycled over and over again? When imagination fails, pull out a naked sadhu on the banks of the Ganga. Or a woman labourer in tatters breast-feeding a scrawny infant in the shadow of a glittering shopping mall. Come on ... get with it. These are our realities, for sure. But they aren't the only ones. Is that so tough to accept?

Don't such obvious contradictions exist in other countries, other cultures? I'm sure the Greeks, for example, are sick of Zorba, Mykonos, feta cheese and the Parthenon. Or the Italians who have to deal with the pizza-pasta-Pavarotti-mafia-Armani-wine typecasts. But at least those images are attractive and glamorous. Besides being as representative as such images can be.

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The French adore the Eiffel Tower and celebrate it as a symbol of France's elevated position in Europe. The French have managed to successfully dominate many diverse areas with complete aplomb. One myth (the Great French Lover) was nearly shattered after extensive surveys disproved the belief. But that's before Sarkozy got into the act and pulled off his shirt to compete with Putin. Sarkozy's love-handles were photo-shopped by obliging editors, but the image of a dashing rake was established, when the danger was of being typecast as a cuckolded husband. This is what twenty-first-century image-fixing is all about. **India needs to**

superstar india

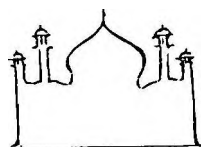
**photo-shop its love-handles.** And in order to do that, we need dedicated, clever, imaginative spokespeople to go out there and radically alter boring, outdated perceptions. Enough has been said about our 5,000-year-old culture. It's time to talk about the 'now'—the next five, twenty, fifty years. Especially the next five, which are likely to be crucial—a do-or-die half-a-decade during which we either get our act together as a nation, or allow ourselves to fall into a self-dug, bottomless pit. Our sadhus and snake charmers aren't going anywhere. Let them stay, by all means. We love them. They are us. But we love so many other wonderful, crazy, amazing things equally. The Taj Mahal is our pride and joy, a symbol of our singularity. May it remain that way.

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It's hard to get away from 'The Monument to Eternal Love'. The Taj Mahal is imprinted in every Indian's consciousness. Like the Statue of Liberty is for Americans. Most people are not aware of their precise history. Why? But that does not hinder an upsurge of nationalistic euphoria when a controversial reference crops up. For me, the Taj is like a recurrent dream. It pops up on my mind's screen at the oddest of times—given its heart-breaking beauty, it continues to affect me profoundly like few other monuments I've seen the world over (the Sphinx, in particular, left me totally cold). I keep coming back to the Taj, since it has become an under-utilized asset, like several others in our country. Apart from last year's campaign to get it on the 'Seven Wonders of the World' list, that gullible Indians fell for wholesale, the Taj has not been marketed to

*From Incredible to Unstoppable*

its full potential. When you say 'Egypt', the Pyramids pop up automatically. When you say China, it's the Great Wall. These are reflex actions—that's how strong the imaging has been. But when you say India ...?





But when  
you say 'India'—  
what pops up?



Beggars and snake charmers. Is young India bothered by this? I wonder. Young India solely invests in itself. The impression given is one of extreme narcissism. Selfish and self-seeking, their world begins and ends at the belly button. Talking to a Parsee friend who left India twenty-one years ago to 'make it' in America, I declared with great aplomb, 'This is a great time to be an Indian, living in India. Come back. All is forgiven.' There was a longish pause. Then the friend added, 'Really? I wish I could believe you. It's sounding great right now. But how long is this going to last? I don't have the guts to give up everything I've established here and try my luck back home. I miss India desperately ... but I'm scared to return.' The loneliness and longing in her voice were unmistakable. I could visualize her easily in her adopted country, just about managing to hang in there, earning a modest income and coping with a useless husband. The India she remembers no longer exists. She may be shocked if she ever decides to pay a visit. She may be delighted to see the sweeping changes

that have taken place in her old neighbourhood but I doubt it.

Nostalgia is a strange thing. I've noticed this about all those Indians who left in a huff, looking for a better, even superior life in the West. At the time they were convinced they were the smart ones who'd taken the right decision at the right time. When they did visit, there was an annoying smugness evident in their attitude. Disdainful and supercilious, they'd turn up their noses at virtually everything in sight—in fact, the very things they'd grown up with—and paint a glorious picture of their new life in America. It was always America. Rarely England, Europe or Australia. And certainly never Africa (forget the Indian traders who went there centuries ago—hardly anybody in the past sixty years bothered to). The America-returned would speak in phoney yankee accents and feign ignorance when it came to recalling common names of fruits, spices, vegetables they'd eaten most of their lives, till hopping on to the flight West. It was bizarre. And what was worse, we let it get to us! There was self-doubt and a crisis of confidence, as we asked ourselves: **Are we dumb? Gutless? Are those guys smarter than us?**

Today, the scenario is radically different. It is the deserters who are looking wistfully at their homeland and saying to themselves: we're missing out on the whole boom! But it's too late. Well, too bad. The dollar's weakening position doesn't make their decision to flee look good. They review our Sensex and kick themselves for not having kept the faith. Most of them have their earnings tied



to Dow indices. In recent times, the dollar has not travelled well, leading to compromises and cutbacks. Nobody back in India waits any longer for these folks to unpack their suitcases and pull out slabs of chocolates and other goodies that were unavailable in Indian stores till a few short years ago. A bottle of Scotch? Keep it! The duty-free shops at our own airports offer better options at sharper prices. Imported watches? Thanks, but no thanks. We can pick up the world's best in stores across India. Perfumes? Electronic goods? T-shirts? Hey—why don't you guys help yourselves to what we have on offer and take them back with you?

Childish? Yes. But also human. For thirty of our sixty years as a country, we suffered from a sense of inferiority. Nothing we did or produced was deemed good enough. We started to think our standards were far too low to impress outsiders. Besides, the awful 'Third World' tag was nearly impossible to shake off. 'Third World' instantly demoted us. Made us feel inadequate and small. This was followed by a less direct but equally offensive 'Developing Nation' label. Perhaps we over-reacted to both. Maybe they were accurate and apt descriptions that we had to accept, however unpalatable they were.

This has changed. And changed at a speed that's leaving us breathless. To put it all down to the Silicon Valley syndrome would be to ignore everything else. India's IT story was but a part of the bigger picture. I remember going to New York five years ago and feeling like a country hick at times, particularly when dealing with the desi IT

community there. It was in their eyes and body language. The unspoken message read: Poor you! Look at us. This is the place to be. We can conquer the world. We are Americans. Not Third-Worlders.

348 I also remember meeting a beautiful Bombay socialite who'd once been the toast of the town, celebrated for her good looks and fine marriage. She looked sheepish when I ran into her in a fancy Park Avenue store where she worked as a sales assistant. She'd uprooted herself from her comfortable south Mumbai apartment, applied for a green card, and decided to seek employment at whatever level, in order to stay in the US. And what was the big attraction? She wanted her children to become US citizens and get the benefit of schooling at state universities offering attractive scholarships. If she'd only known that in under a decade, those kids would be nagging her to come back to India!

Yes, they're all heading home. I meet thirty-somethings who've decided to take their chances in India, rather than rough it out in a foreign country. These are graduates from top B-Schools in the US who had once dazzled their own classmates back in India, with stories of making a killing on Wall Street. **Greed took them to America. Greed is bringing them back.** This is where the money is. This is where they'll try and repeat their earlier winning tactic. Any which way, they seem relieved to be back in the family fold, eating daal-chawal with aunts, uncles, cousins. Celebrating festivals, re-establishing old ties (somewhat frayed in the interim). They've gone desi with a vengeance, taking to lounging around in khadi kurtas, while their kids

discover the wonders of eating sticky, traditional sweetmeats at Diwali, and bathe using lotas, not showers. The 'Returnees' are reluctantly admitting that life in India is definitely more comfortable and comforting. 'After a point, we couldn't cope with the loneliness. Making money provided a high. It was a great lifestyle and all that. Vacations in the Hamptons, weekends in Paris ... but we still felt homeless and lost. Like we could never really belong. It was tough getting back after all those years overseas. But it's the best decision we could have made. We are happy. The kids are happy. The money is good ...' Welcome home, you ingrates! From ABCDs to NRIs (Non-Recognizable Indians), it's been a long journey.

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Jo Jeeta, woh Sikander?

And to think we mocked poor Manoj Kumar when he made all those icky films more than thirty years ago! Remember *Purab Aur Paschim* or *Roti, Kapda aur Makan*? This formula was cloned by the likes of Subhash Ghai (*Pardes*) and Ashutosh Gowariker (*Swades*). But the message in all the films from this genre was essentially the same: West is West. Home is best. Simplistic but to the point, if one could overlook the ludicrousness of some of the set pieces in the films that exaggerated the Evils of Western Societies in a gross, vulgar and juvenile manner, contrasting them with the pious simplicity of life in India. Utter nonsense, of course. But how the envious masses loved to

believe this to be true! It was the only consolation at the time for people unable to travel overseas and see the realities for themselves. **Today, India is on roller-skates. Or jet-skis. Everyone is travelling abroad, or so it seems at any of our international airports.** Bookings for 2009/2010 are underway, passports are being issued adopting less time-consuming procedures, foreign exchange is not doled out reluctantly, like it was gold, and the Great Indian Travel Show is well and truly on the road.

350 This is a terrific move, for Indians are naturally curious people, ready to learn, mix, absorb, share. Unlike some of their Asian cousins, Indians enjoy experimentation and are entirely open to new experiences. They bring a robust quality to their travels, something the world is not entirely prepared for! No wonder Indians make it to the top ten nationalities the travel trade lives in dread of! Loud, demanding, untidy and inconsiderate of local sentiments, Indian tourists, frankly, make a nuisance of themselves wherever they go.

Nothing dampens their enthusiasm. And nothing deters them from approaching complete strangers with unreasonable requests. One of the most popular gambits is to ask blondes in summery dresses to pose for pictures with them. This gets embarrassing for the unsuspecting blonde who volunteers for the first snapshot. Soon, she finds herself surrounded by eager mobs pouring out of tourist buses, with Munnas, Pappus and Sweetys eagerly awaiting their turn to be clicked with a *gori*. What starts off as a polite gesture from the blonde, ends up as a nightmare.

Especially if rowdy groups of men, guzzling beer, decide they want the definitive pic to flash back home. What better than a close-up with a blonde stranger? This is the stuff desi male fantasies are built on. 'An Evening in Paris', with a blue-eyed seductress, while downing beer from a can! It can't get better than that. Imagine the reactions of all those horny, jealous men in the office? Imagine the potential of milking the picture to fan their dirty fantasies! ('So ... what exactly did you do with the *gori*? Did she do it for free, or did you have to pay? How was it with her? *Kiss-viss kiya ki nahi, yaar?*'). Sick!

Two Japanese tourists got raped in Agra. That was the chilling headline. And my heart sank. Again. Glib, Japanese-speaking local guides abducted those trusting Japanese women, held them at a remote destination, where they were repeatedly raped. The women managed to escape and were bold enough to report the matter to the police at Delhi's international airport. The men were caught. But this was not the experience of other tourists to India's number one showpiece. Press stories of 'lepchas' (unlicensed guides) 'marrying' Japanese girls have been doing the rounds as well. The Taj keeps coming back into my narrative, because of the immense symbolism attached to it. The minute one puts out a negative story about the monument, it generates world-wide interest of the worst kind. As we say, '*Badnaami ho jaati hai*'.

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**Right now, India is in a *Hum Kissi Se Kum Nahi* frame of mind. We want to show off and twirl in the spotlight. We cannot afford to tarnish our image even**

a little. We need to fix such problems, and to do so firmly. I don't know about those unfortunate Japanese ladies who should have known better than to take off with unknown men in a strange country. Perhaps, they were in search of an exotic adventure. After all, a report on the same day rated Indians at an impressive No. 3 position in the countries surveyed for the topic 'Adventurous Lovers'. Naïve tourists frequently fall for such nonsense and decide to conduct their own personal surveys! We, who live here, know better!

352 The day these two stories appeared in the press, my eyes fell on another, really provocative picture of a Caucasian female tourist dancing with a Rajasthani musician. The woman was dressed in brief shorts and a cropped top, her left leg entwined with the dhoti-clad musician's, extended right one. It was a great picture taken by a sharp photographer from an international agency. I'm sure it ran in countless papers around the world. But my first thought on seeing it was: Heaven help the woman!

**Cross-cultural signals can get horribly misunderstood.** Rajasthan is one state in our country that prides itself on its ultra-conservatism. It is here that the inhuman practice of 'sati' is still admired in the villages, and a 'Sati Sthan' has been created in memory of Roop Kanwar, a modern-day victim who supposedly insisted on being burnt alive on her husband's funeral pyre. I don't believe a word of this humbug story. And even if true, it is revolting in the extreme.

In such an environment, half-clad women dancing with

local men are plainly offending sensibilities here! Ghungats are the rule and even the foreign-educated 'Royals' aren't spared, as I observed during a weekend in Jodhpur, at the launch of the world's Fashion Bible. In such a surreal setting (the backdrop for the spectacular fashion show was the even more spectacular palace hotel), the contrasts between customs were that much more exaggerated. I wondered, for example, what the lowly labourers who'd constructed the elegant set, fixed the hi-tech lighting systems and arranged the banquet tables, made of an evening that saw glittering models (Indian and foreign) dressed in very little, with even more glittering socialites displaying diamonds and décolletage, in the audience. The few female Royals present were discreetly clad in trademark chiffon sarees, heads demurely covered. That the same 'Royals' promptly change into international designer gear the moment their airplane lifts off for foreign shores is a charming comment on our complex society—so open, on one level, so closed on another, and so confused on a third!

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I watched clips of the India @ 60 celebrations in New York City, and wasn't at all surprised to see a gigantic model of—yes—the Taj Mahal. A similar one was seen floating down the Thames a month earlier. And I wondered how we could capitalize on the monument's phenomenal brand equity to boost our own. Just as Rajasthan is stuck in its sand-dunes-and-camel-fairs imaging, or Kerala can't move away too far from the backwaters-and-ayurvedic-massage-shacks USP, we as a nation must surge ahead with the easy bounce and confidence of our young cricket heroes. **The**

**Taj is amazing. No debate. But there's more to India than an ancient mausoleum. However, if it's the Taj they want, it's the Taj they'll get. But first, let's fix up the Taj. Position it the way it deserves to be positioned.**

Not cricket

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Don't get me started on cricket. I don't want to commit sacrilege or be blatantly blasphemous. Dhoni and his Josh Machines (the energetic T20 team that won the World Cup, defeating Pakistan), is still in a euphoric mood. The day that historic match was to be played in Jo'berg, I was engaged in two diametrically different activities. My day was spent being a jury member, appropriately scanning candidates short-listed for the Lead India initiative launched by the *Times of India*. Twenty-four young, ambitious, charged-up persons were to face us—the jury—and the number would further shrink to a more compact eight. This was the second and final day of deliberations. Everyone was in a rush to run through the last lot of worthy hopefuls (some nominated, others, self-nominated). There was a clash of priorities. But the main reason for the rush was to get to a television on, time to catch the cricket final.

These meetings coincided with the ninth and tenth days of the Ganesh Utsav. Both are important days for devotees (me!) who hadn't had the chance to get a darshan of their favourite deity earlier. Mumbai virtually shuts down on



Visarjan day, with traffic regulations diverting motorists to less crowded routes in order to facilitate the slow and majestic progress of Ganpati idols making their way to the sea. But on the penultimate day, when all roads led to Lal Baugh where Mumbai's 'Raja' temporarily resides and presides over the festival, the mood was electric on account of the cricket match starting at 5.30 p.m. Devotees who'd queued up for up to fourteen long hours for a brief glimpse of the god from half-a-kilometre away, were showing unusual signs of restlessness as they pleaded with strutting organizers to speed up the process. I was stuck in the melee myself and getting increasingly hot under the collar. Cops at the chowki manning the mass of humanity surging towards the *pandal* were on red alert, clearly conscious of the potential threat of a terrorist attack. But even they, were discussing cricket and Dhoni's chances of bringing the cup home even as their eyes expertly surveyed the crowd for potential trouble-makers. Some were grumbling they'd be forced to miss the historic match, since *bandobast* duty could not be avoided. But as one of them joked, 'Half the devotees here have come especially to pray for the team's victory—Ganpati Bappa, Morya.' I noticed an undercover agent (there were thousands of them during the festival) adjusting her fancy saree and hair self-consciously before merging into the crowd. Her male colleagues were teasing her mercilessly and clicking pictures on their cell-phones. She looked determined as she gave her bright red lips a final touch-up. But not before saying '*Chak de, India! Aaj jeet hamari ...*' Even her bosses smiled indulgently while

wishing her luck.

My own mission had to be aborted, since the pandal organizers had decided to shut most of the entrances for reasons of security. Never one to give up, I shamelessly phoned Javed Ahmed, the dynamic police officer whom Mumbai acknowledges as the attractive face of the beleaguered cop force. He asked me whether time was an issue—would I be prepared to go at 11 p.m., or later? I would, indeed! It was done. The match had reached a crucial point when Javed called to confirm the darshan. ‘Pray for the team,’ he said. ‘Have been doing just that . . . now, I shall go and thank Ganpati, if we win,’ I answered. My stress levels must have shot up, as I found myself turning away from the television screen unable to watch the last over. Imagine! And I’m not even a cricket fan!

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I was fervently praying to the Raja to save our *izzat* and grant us victory! In a bloody cricket match, for God’s sake! Just a match! Not a war. I had gone crazy, like the rest of the country. Insane with tension and anxiety. For what? Who would actually gain from this great victory, besides our cute Boys in Blue and their bosses? Yet, it was crucial to win. It was Pakistan we were going to thrash, after all. I started to breathe again, once I heard the whoops and cries. Tears were flowing down my cheeks as I rushed to fall at the Raja’s feet and thank him for listening to my prayer. Yup. My individual prayer. Not anybody else’s. Such is faith. In God. And in a game. Who can challenge sentiment?

It was the power of a psychological victory that moved the entire nation collectively that night. Nobody was

immune to the moment. Spontaneous celebrations took place all over India as the joyous mood spilled over and the streets became party zones, crammed with exultant cries of 'India! Ind-I-aa!' People sang the national anthem over and over again and ran around blindly, waving the tricolour. Temporary madness has its advantages, when the force driving it is positive and inspiring. This wasn't only about cricket. It was a gigantic booster shot for the country's morale. **India was on a high that unforgettable evening, when people danced on the streets and felt good about themselves and their country.** These moments happen rarely, which is why it's important to cherish them, remember them. I don't think any Indian who was part of this celebration will ever forget what it meant or how proud it made us feel to thump our chests and declare, 'We won! India won!'

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Oof! The power of branding!

The '*Lalbaugh chha Raja*' who has now become Mumbai's most important 'celebrity', with advertisers and mediawallahs falling over backwards to 'own' the god. It was amusing but also annoying to note that the entire street leading up to the pandal was lined with huge billboards promoting wine on one side of the busy street, and a *gutka* merchant who is serving a jail term, plugging 'oxyrich' mineral water, on the other! The commercialization of India does not spare festivals or gods (who are amongst the

biggest money-spinners). A rival pandal had adorned their Ganesh with gold jewellery worth seven crore (carefully removed and locked away before immersing the idol). **Everybody wants to climb on to the brandwagon, whether it's Durga Puja or Ram Leela, Pongal, Diwali, Christmas or Id.** No dearth of 'Space for Sale'. Sponsors line up instantly if the 'product' has a promising market. And who better than a much-loved god to push and peddle everything from booze to banks?

358 Since our cricketers are demi-gods themselves, the Boys have become crorepatitis overnight. Nobody grudges them their prize money or the Porsche given to Yuvraj Singh. Endorsements continue to rain on these photogenic youngsters, who know their brand-worth and how to milk it before their first big match is even played. Like that telling scene from *Iqbal*, which shows an oily agent pressing a cheque into 'Iqbal's' hands, sensing a winner!

It is blatantly about big bucks—but isn't everything else too? On the eve of the cricket team's cavalcade through Mumbai (a 30-km distance from the airport to the Wankhede Stadium, that took hours to cover), a team of casual workers slaved overnight to plaster an open-top BEST bus with pictures of the captain rejoicing after the win. The captain's mug on the bus was fine, considering he was the Most Desired Male on the subcontinent at the time. But riding on the hysteria, politicians insisted on their pictures being splashed all over the bus as well. Piggy-backing on cricketers' visibility took an aggressive turn at the official reception, during which the front row was

dominated by the same politicians again, while the country's heroes were bundled off to Row 2! Such are our skewered priorities at a time that ought to demonstrate our sporting spirit. The cricketers had earned the spotlight. By trying to hog it from them, our politicians, once again, put their own petty insecurities on display.

Newspapers carried front-page coverage (paid for by an advertiser of course) of the parade. And then went on to assess the net worth of these young men, taking their saleability quotient into the reckoning. The commodification of cricket was complete. Just like the Ganesh Utsav no longer belongs to the people (as its brilliant founder, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, had envisaged it to be). It belongs to fat-cat advertisers who've hijacked it smoothly and expertly.

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Today, our Boys in Blue have been auctioned off! Yup. They were traded in the marketplace—and nobody seemed to mind. They were sold to the highest bidder like collectibles at a Christie's sale. Their price-tags went public, and everyone knew the cost of, say, Harbhajan Singh. **Demeaning? Not really. Just cricket. Today's cricket.**

The spectacular ODI win in Australia threw up yet another boy wonder—Ishant Sharma. Now, he's up for grabs ... even as 'old man' Tendulkar mops up some more endorsements and props up the team each time the going gets rough. Will Ishant become the new 'Item Boy' of cricket? Hey—the kid's nineteen, okay? But money talks. Let's see ... before you can say 'Lalit Modi', Ishant will

have 'SOLD' written all over him.

Old-timers shake their heads and wonder whether all this is 'good for cricket' (Is aspirin good for blood pressure?). The important thing about the so-called 'commercialization' of the 'holy' game is that with 88 players representing India (as opposed the earlier 11) more and more young cricketers are getting the chance to wear the prestigious blue jersey. Even more significant is the fact that these promising youngsters come from obscure towns and hamlets, armed with a dream, guts and talent. If they can become national heroes, millions of others can aspire to be too. The old elitism has all but disappeared. Our 'Boys' stand for more than just excellence in a chosen game—they represent hope. A far more worthy achievement. Small-town India becomes a part of the mainstream, in one stroke of the willow. Isn't that inspiring?

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**So who finally wins? Small-town India.**

The pressure to 'conform', to 'make it', must be so great, that the Rohit Sharma-story, seen in this context, makes perfect sense. What does a twenty-year-old cricketer from a humble background do once he gets his first ten-lakh cheque for an advertisement? Does he hand it over to his proud parents and ask them to use the money for whatever was important to improve the quality of their lives? Nope. According to insiders, the lad put eight lakh down for a fancy car. The balance two were used to buy a fancy watch! He had to be seen as a dude with the right accessories, or else he'd be dubbed a *lalloo* or a 'loser'.

Perhaps he is right and I am wrong. It is largely about

perception these days. If you're perceived to be rich, people are willing to give you even more money! Rohit was shrewdly investing in himself, so he could negotiate better when the next Johnny came along with a contract. Perhaps his parents agreed with his decision. Perhaps they, too, understood how important it is to project an image of success, before you actually achieve it! Weird and ironical. It used to be the other way around.

And even then, clever people played down their worth, fearing the kaali nazar of jealous neighbours. If a person was worth ten crore, he'd live the life of a man earning ten lakh. There was so much guilt surrounding the acquisition of wealth. That has disappeared and been replaced by an in-your-face brazenness. If someone's got it, it's to flaunt. What's the point otherwise? Young India thinks nothing of borrowing money to flash a lifestyle it can't afford without those tempting loans. People borrow money to holiday or buy jewellery. It's not to create tangible assets—which 'old India' might have done. Being financially overstretched has become a way of life. It's cool to be perpetually in debt and looking for 'outs'.

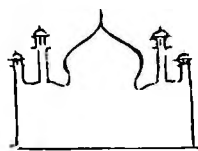
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The only time my father borrowed money was to pay the examination fees for a sister's IAS entrance test. It must have weighed on him to such an extent that the tension generated during that period continued to haunt him fifty long years later. He'd go over the details methodically. The amount (paltry, but not for him), the embarrassment and the eventual relief when he managed to pay off the modest debt!

How different it is for me. And how much more different for my children—India's first plastic generation, heady with the power of the card. Clued-in, smart, looking for that ultimate deal, scoffing at my 'lack of guts' and 'foolish' conservatism that stops me from making clever market moves. And it's no use telling them that I sleep better at night. For it's not true! They sleep equally well—and have 'superior' credit cards to prove their point. So be it.

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From modest family celebrations during Ganpati to the mega-scale, multi-million-rupee carnival it has been converted into, India's brashness is evident at any and every level. Dhoni is thinking of buying the latest Harley, being an ardent biker. That's confidence. And individuality—no BMW or Merc for the darling captain. That's also change. The boy from Jharkhand knows his mind. Ranchi is a long way from the cities he'll now be routinely mobbed in. Dhoni has gone global. And he did it in a record time of two years. *Mera Bharat Jawan?* You bet!





Help, they're  
turning me  
into a gizmo!



It took seventy-five years from its inception for TV to reach fifty million homes. It has taken the Internet four years to achieve the same. Instantly alarming. I heard an earnest young man who'd developed a new software package for cell-phones that he boasted would 'further revolutionize' our lives through dynamic connectivity. He was making a strong sales pitch to a woman (me!) who is terrified of technology and what it was doing to us, especially in India. I look at ads featuring sweet little grannies on cell-phones and PCs and my heart sinks. The brands they're pushing are out to prove how easy it is to use these sleek gizmos, and how quickly Amma can reach her favourite grandchild studying overseas. Once again, I think of my father at ninety-plus who'd seriously considered taking computer classes. For what? I'd insensitively asked, to which he'd replied sharply, 'For the same reason that all of you use computers. In this day and age of such technological strides, I also want to be a part of the change, or else, I'll feel left out, like I'm missing something important that's happening around me. I don't want to look like a fool in front of anyone, and I don't want to

depend on anybody either. If I want to buy a computer, I will. But I should first learn how to use it.' That had shut me!

But then, my father had always succeeded in shutting me up. I was stumped. And also envious. It had taken me years to come to terms with computers. I was hostile and suspicious after I lost over 5,000 carefully keyed-in words to cyberspace. Entirely my mistake—I'd forgotten to press 'save'. It was then that I decided not to give up on good old-fashioned long-hand. My switchover to e-mailing columns was voluntary. I'd gotten pretty sick of sub-editors massacring copy they couldn't decipher. Today my columns stay in neat folders, and I am as computer-literate as I want to be. With children overseas, basic skills have become mandatory—to scan, upload and send family pix, for instance. And Skype away whenever the connection cooperates. These are tools that make our crazy lives somewhat simpler.

Or do they? A generous friend gifted me a Blackberry on my last birthday. I squealed with delight as I held the glossy monster in my hand. I felt empowered and very twenty-first-century as Chanda, my galpal, shared her sophisticated techno knowledge with me. 'It's so simple ... look ... all you have to do is ...' Yeah. Sure. The hard-sell continued. 'You can get your e-mails, finish a lot of work in the car, programme it to remind you about important "to do" things, make notes, store info ... my God! There's little it can't do, besides have sex with the owner.' Woh! This I had to check out for myself. Sincere

attempts were indeed made—and eventually abandoned. The Great Techie Revolution will have to do without one revolutionary—me!

**There's no escaping the fact India is going big-time techie, as even a day trip to Pune can convince the non-converts.** The number of glistening techno parks that seem to spring up, virtually overnight, in and around Peshwa territory! Nothing can or will ever be the same again, as anyone who looks down from the plane as it comes swiftly over the treacherous ghats and descends onto the Deccan Plateau will tell you. Looking at Pune from that height and perspective, makes the viewer wonder where he or she is. For as far as the eye can see, one can discern frantic construction taking place over several square miles of what was once just flat, rocky land of no special consequence. A few fighter planes at the air force base, the famous Yerawada Jail (home to hard-core criminals, terrorists and more recently, movie stars like Sanjay Dutt), and forest land covering large tracts.

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Today, that same area is unrecognizable, with steel and glass structures housing thousands of young geeks who work in shifts at these gleaming sweatshops. Every big name in the business has a back-end office here. From banks (HSBC) to techno giants like IBM. Gigantic, futuristic temples of hi-tech gadgetry dazzle visitors and make one blink at the extraordinary speed demonstrated by world-class builders who've erected these stunning complexes in record time. To support the influx of young professionals, the profile of the city has undergone a profound change

too. It is a change I can't keep up with! Each time I visit Pune, I go 'Wah! Wah!' and 'Oh no!' in turn. Well-loved landmarks get torn down to make way for malls, fancy service apartments, housing, entertainment complexes, restaurants and bars. The average age of citizens is around twenty-two. And there is enough money to make living there entirely attractive.

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The techies are everywhere! Zombie-like and chilled out, they work crazy hours at insane salaries, and before burn-out claims them, they party even harder at trendy lounge bars playing Arabic pop along with Bollywood mixes and Bhangra hits. 'It's a great life,' a beautiful Turkish girl told me, as she finished her beer at what is Pune's hottest weekend spot—'Soho'. Pune is attracting professionals from all over the world. A young Belgian woman, managing 'Oakwood' (upscale service apartments) in snob Koregaon Park, complained mildly about the limited availability of Cuban cigars and rare whiskies. 'Is there a market for them?' I asked naively. 'You'd be surprised ... people have the money and the awareness,' she answered, while briskly instructing a chef to rethink the Caesar Salad dressing which he had 'desified'. Most occupants in the 84-suite complex were foreigners who'd decided to relocate to Pune.

I spotted several young children. 'Where do they school?' I asked. 'Oh, there are several excellent options offering international baccalaureate programmes. Plus, the Mercedes school is top-rated if expensive.' The city has geared up to meet the challenge of accommodating a large number of foreigners who have decided to make Pune

their home. 'Mocha' the popular coffee shop in Koregaon Park, is shrewdly dressed up in Osho's official colour—maroon. There are fresh-faced kids' smoking sheeshas at adjoining tables and scanning a menu that features the best coffee beans from around the world, and international snacks that are giving the local favourite (*dhabelis*—a version of Mumbai's vada pav) stiff competition, even at much higher prices. My own bill for a coffee and a banana-walnut muffin is close to Rs 500. But going by the number of kids pouring in, I guess money is not an issue here. Everyone seems to have plenty of it.

Close to 'Mocha' is a leafy lane with lovely bungalows. I used to stay at one of these bungalows more than thirty years ago, when Pune was still seen as a 'cantonment hill station', home to wealthy Parsees owning pedigreed race horses and sprawling estates, besides scholarly Maharashtrians and committed theatre/music/film personalities who gave Pune its very special character—at once arrogant, erudite and aloof. Technology has changed all that and become a great leveller. The Pune intellectuals are virtually invisible. Perhaps they've fled to Mumbai? The city is overrun by anonymous young things dressed like potential terrorists, as they cover their entire heads and faces with scarves, leaving just a narrow slit for the eyes. 'Pollution,' explained a denim-clad student while climbing on to her bike. 'Fashion!' yelled out her friend as she strapped on her helmet before jumping onto the pillion seat. 'Whatever,' I replied cheerfully while waving them off.

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It's a similar story in Bangalore where, hold your breath, the room rates at any five-star hotel can be as high as Rs 35,000 for a single night. And tourists still find themselves wait-listed! Traffic barely moves, as more and more cars hit the Bangalore roads that were better accustomed to stately horse carriages not so long ago. Today, the city is reeling and gasping for breath (literally!). Visitors cannot believe that Bangalore, only recently, proudly called itself India's 'Garden City'. The climate was what was invariably described as 'salubrious' (no more! no more!), and the people, so chilled out, polite, soft-spoken and happy, it shamed the rest of us. That same city is totally transformed and it is marked by a 'greed plus' attitude, lousy administrators and 'outsiders' who have zero emotional stake in the city's future. These birds of passage fly in and out of Bangalore at will, and don't blink at the insane room rates. Talking to a German head of a leading car manufacturing company, I wasn't at all surprised to hear him voice his frustration. 'It takes me more than an hour to move a few, short kilometres. I've taken to completing most of my e-mails in the car ... but what a waste of time!' Younger Bangaloreans are suffering on a different level altogether. It's called the DINK (Double Income No Kids) syndrome. Techie couples, unable to handle the strain of working long hours, often in disorienting time zones, are seeking early divorces, leading to much grief. The money is great, but the quality of life, anything but.

On a recent flight to Bangalore I found myself shamelessly listening in on a rather strident Indian woman



trashing the country in order to impress her British partner. Her accent was a strange mix of Kannada marrying Canada, but the manner in which she tore into India and Bangalore, made me want to lean across and say, 'Honey ... if it's really so bad, why don't you get the hell out?' Dressed in too-tight track-pants, with the ubiquitous laptop slung over her shoulder, she was a picture of unattractiveness, as she started on her marriage woes. The Angrez looked completely uninterested ... his eyes glazed over as he listened glassily to her tirade against her ex! Oh God! If this woman was hoping for a 'Better luck next time' story, she was definitely wasting precious hours on the bored specimen in front of her.

Despite Bangalore's much-discussed 'Gated-community' (people who live like they've never left California), the buying patterns of this lot provide very interesting insights into their psyches. They have the money but they don't have the awareness, when it comes to luxury goods. **Detailed studies have established that upwardly mobile Bangaloreans will hesitate to buy a Louis Vuitton bag for a lakh or more, but wouldn't mind shelling out the same amount on fancy Bose speakers.** They are still traditional in what they consider 'value for money' items. A bride will spend Rs 80,000 on a real zari Kanjeevaram silk saree, as she sees actual worth in it ('If I melt the saree, I'll get gold from the zari'), but she will think twice before spending the same amount on a pair of Jimmy Choo snakeskin sandals. Cash does not equal flash down south. An investment has to be tangible—

house, car, jewellery. Brands don't mean as much as they do up north. Lifestyle options, such as an adventure holiday or a luxury cruise, have their takers. But overall, buying habits are conservative, with a big emphasis on savings.

### Loco over luxury

Bangalore is readying itself for the opening of a plush mall devoted to luxury. Will it attract the volume of required footfalls to make it an attractive destination? Retailers who've booked space at killer rates in the Kingfisher Mall are holding their breaths. Louis Vuitton has taken pride of place on the ground floor. It is believed, once LV shows the way, the rest will follow. But that has not been Pune's experience so far. While there is no denying the purchasing power of worthy Puneites, they prefer to shop in Mumbai, or climb into their personal jets to fly off for a weekend shopping spree in Milan or Paris. High-end boutiques have still to succeed in either city, even though there are enough fashionistas ready to splurge.

So, what does the '*Aaj ki Raat*' crowd do when 'It's the time to disco'? Are they thinking of the future at all? One meets all types, of course. But hedonism is hard to resist, when there are so many temptations. The d-word (drugs) is a particularly dreaded one, especially for parents who've grown up in the 'other' India—the one in which a reference to 'coke' was assumed to mean a fizzy soft drink and even that was viewed with suspicion. It is well known how the

world's favourite cola was kicked out of India when George Fernandes (the fiery union leader of yore, and presently a tired politician), went on a rampage against the American giant, equating its entry into India with a sinister capitalist conspiracy to swamp the country with undesirable goods, designed to destabilize and eventually destroy the youth. If George only knew then ('70s), what we now know—unbranded coke has succeeded in penetrating our markets in such an insidious manner, we cannot gauge how thoroughly it has saturated our space. I can only tell by the casual references to its rampant usage that it's going to be India's tragedy if society insists on keeping its blinkers on.

Recreational drugs have turned so kosher, they no longer elicit shock or fear. I've heard kids of fourteen or fifteen talking about substance abuse within their age group, in the same way we, as schoolchildren, would discuss a naughty classmate caught smoking Dad's cigarette or swigging beer. I can still recall the thrill I experienced with a group of friends as we took our first few puffs of a mentholated cigarette and almost gagged in the attempt. We also shared a bottle of beer in the backseat of a car, and were promptly dubbed the 'bad girls' of the batch for indulging in something so sinful. We lived in dread of our parents finding out (they did! But years later), or our principal rusticating us for such a serious breach of school discipline (even though, we were on a holiday in Matheran, on our own time and perfectly entitled to risk ruin and damnation, if that's what we wanted).

It's an entirely different story out there these days, as

teenagers boldly 'smoke up' (marijuana) and snort (coke), without their parents being any the wiser! 'Each generation invents its own kicks,' a friend advised me wisely. 'Even kicks that kill?' I countered. She shrugged. 'This is the twenty-first century, my dear. Wake up ...'

The 'wake-up' calls never end!

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Just as you believe you've finally cracked the 'youth code', you're confronted with a fresh perspective on the subject you think you've understood. Talking to a bright thirty-two-year-old who has it all—great looks, money, success and a terrific future—I was a little surprised to hear him say, 'I really miss those days when India had nothing ... everybody drove the same Fiat car, had the same ugly black telephone in the house, we all wore the same sort of clothes, ate the same food, saw the same movies ... and felt "safe" in the conformity. We didn't compete as fiercely—there was nothing out there to compete for! A can of Pepsi was the most coveted treat—imagine! There were one or two brands of beer. No malls. Nothing. Life was less stressful ...' He went on to say how he often lay in bed for hours longing for the old life, growing up with indulgent but sensible grandparents who gave a fixed amount of money for Diwali or other celebrations. It never varied—a hundred and one rupees in a plain white envelope. These days, he said, he tips valets outside five-star hotels in multiples of that modest amount!

In a deeply introspective and nostalgic mood, the young entrepreneur decided to go back to his ancestral family home in the heart of Mumbai. Of course, it had been torn down (despite being a listed Heritage structure), and in its place a monstrous high-rise complex had come up. Even though he knew what had transpired, he wasn't ready to deal with the visual trauma of seeing the spot where a beautiful bungalow had once stood, being converted into a ghastly eyesore with escalators! And yet, memories of that busy street which used to come alive during every festival drove him to his favourite Ganpati temple in the vicinity. Childhood memories of extended family celebrations came rushing in—cousins, aunts, uncles, grandparents, dressed in festive finery, feasting together at a long table, or seated on wooden platforms placed on the marble floor.

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These days his 'lifestyle' is far superior. But 'life' itself has gone out of all the celebrations he cherished. After the death of his grandparents, there's no one left to carry forward those traditions and rituals. By the time he gets married and has kids, nobody will even remember what used to be done during Janmashtami, Navratri, Diwali or Holi. There's no one to guide this lot, even if they wish to revive some of the customs. The family gods have been packed away and are hidden in steel trunks. And there's no family priest to preside over pujas that mark each festival.

Naming ceremonies of newborns have been replaced by 'baby showers' before birth, and an 'event' managed by professional planners on the baby's first birthday. Cocktail

parties are mandatory before an engagement. Bollywood-style sangeet ceremonies dominate weddings. The older generation appears fatigued and unable to cope with the rapid change. Grandmas have taken to jogging in parks, wearing tracks and the latest trainers. Pizzas have replaced *pakwans*. Freelance cooks roll up on motorbikes and insist on dishing out 'Mexican' food (chapattis with *rajma*!). The suspended generation has no guidance. Caught between a warm and happy childhood, unable to deal with present-day cut-throat competition ('My Choos are better than yours'), and fearful of the future ('Oh God ... if the pace is killing *me*, what will happen to my *kids*?'), this lot has taken to escapism via a cocktail of drugs, booze and easy sex. They have more money than they know what to do with, but continue to be restless and confused. There is a vast disconnect, and it isn't just an urban/elite phenomenon. Small-townners dream of making it big in the metros. And the people in the metros are unable to deal with the sudden and dramatic socio-economic changes in their lives.

'I feel lonely most of the time,' said the thirty-two-year-old in a defeated, forlorn voice. An outsider would find that a strange admission from a man who is perceived to be privileged. He says he's sick of the 'excess', the same parties featuring the same people desperately trying to impress one another with their latest acquisitions—the second and third homes, biannual vacations to exotic destinations (Bogota is very big right now), pedigreed dogs imported from Europe (pugs are out! Mastiffs are in), this

season's 'It' bag (definitely a Bottega—so discreet!) ... all the trappings of a turbo-charged society hankering for MORE. A little like Putin's Russia, where the middle class has gone mad, and new tycoons are thrown up every month.

**Where will this end? Who knows? What will replace the cliched sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll mantra?** Nearly everything has come full circle. Spirituality remains the last frontier for the young, but even that is being packaged and sold by canny, manipulative marketers. New-age gurus and erudite 'Gita' experts are coming out of the woodwork. There is a 'master' for any and every anxiety. Some read auras, others heal through vibrations, and sexy amulets studded with glittering stones and metals for every ailment. The Spiritual Bazaar has become a billion-dollar business model. Motorbike gurus with fake American accents fool the swish set into believing all that mumbo-jumbo will lead to nirvana. Younger and younger people are fleeing to Himalayan *ashrams* to detox and get a handle on life. It is as if they are saying petulantly, 'We are supposed to have it all—why is it, then, that we are unhappy?'

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Western media (and business people) love to provide insights and answers (often unsolicited). It is as if they are almost resentful of India's success story ... like India has no business to be shining or gleaming. The approach is

superstar india

invariably the same. They come on a week's exploratory trip, meet half-a-dozen of the usual suspects. And go back to file the same old story—the 'shocking' contrast between the haves and have-nots. The 'heartlessness' of Mumbai's wealthy towards Mumbai's 'homeless'. Mandatory trips are made to Dharavi (of course!). "“Loose Mud” is what Dharavi translates to from the original Tamil,’ wrote a *New York Times* reporter, after doing a pretty superficial, almost aerial-survey type story on ‘Mumbai’s Moment’. It is as if the West is unable or unwilling to come to terms with the fact that an Asian economy can be this aggressive, this glamorous. The target remains India, not China, since India, a vibrant democracy, is seen as posing the bigger threat. China can be more easily discounted, with pooh-poohing putdowns about the political bosses who show to the West what they want the West to see. Nothing more. India, on the other hand, has nothing to hide. ‘Come and see for yourself,’ is the clear message. **‘Judge us. Condemn us, correct us, accept us ... the options are all in your hands. But we’ll be damned if we are going to be apologetic about our success, or explain our confidence, to make you more comfortable.’**

Moscow and Mumbai are being compared constantly, adopting the same mocking tone. We have no problem with that. If the czars set the pace many centuries ago, by living opulently and angering the peasants, our own maharajahs did pretty much the same thing. **Luxury is not new to India. But it is comparatively new to America.** Perhaps that is what leads to the thinly veiled



antagonism when it comes to the reportage of the spectacular India story. It's easy to focus on contradictory images—a naked kid splashing in rain water near a sprawling slum, shanty-towns along the edges of swanky sky-scrapers, bullock carts on a busy street, cheek-by-jowl with the latest BMW. It's the same temptation Asian journos fall for when they take pictures of New York's druggies or the homeless, next to the famous bronze bull on Wall Street. There is poverty everywhere.

Poverty itself comes in many guises. What an Indian sees maybe is the moral and spiritual poverty of the West, which is much harder to fix than the material poverty of this region. Money, progress, jobs and education can lift our people and give the poor a better life, perhaps twenty years from now. But what can the West possibly do to address its own issues which have led to a far more serious crisis? **There was a time (pre-George Bush) when America was the 800-pound gorilla. All it had to do was stare the quaking opponent down. What America wanted America got!** The whole world believed it was the land of milk and honey.

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Well ... look what happened to that amazingly-crafted myth post-9/11. Where is America today? Oh, it's still trying to flex its muscles, and prove that its old supremacy is still intact. **But as everybody knows, the emperor's wearing no clothes.** America's positioning in world perception has never been lower. It has taken a major hit. *George Bush blew it!*

As of now, regardless of which candidate occupies the

superstar india

White House in the next elections (my money is on Hillary Clinton), the dented image looks hard to fix in such a short period of time. Recession seems a certainty. The sub-prime issue will take America down for sure but the downfall of the mighty dollar is bound to affect other economics, too. For America to regain lost glory, much more will have to be done than pulling out of Iraq with its tail between its legs. The world has not forgotten the mess in Vietnam. Well, that got salvaged over a period of thirty years. But to most America-watchers, the current imbroglio is not going to be that easy to resolve. The slide has begun. America has to deal with its self-inflicted wounds. But even the best-planned exercise in damage control won't be able to reverse what is already in motion. The world has seen the chink in America's armour. The world has lost faith in America itself. The old image of an all-powerful, mighty behemoth, impenetrable, invincible, lies in shambles. **Who can pick up the pieces and put this Humpty Dumpty together again?**

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This is the refrain one hears all the time, even from Americans themselves, when they care to be honest. The smarter ones realize it's futile to pretend everything is hunky-dory and that America can get its groove back in a hurry. Back to business, as usual? Not on your life. Not for the next fifty years, according to experts. 'The country, as a whole, is in denial,' confessed an American corporate

honcho at a posh dinner in his honour. I thought to myself, 'Of course he'd say that.' He was in India to do business and make money. Big money. He was also smart enough not to exclaim, 'Wow! I didn't realize people in India possessed such cars ... or lived so well.' He'd done his homework. And was careful with his comments. It was the day the Sensex had gone crazy (yet again), and crossed the incredible 20K mark. The mood was one of jubilation, as Möet flowed, and ladies wearing priceless diamonds discussed their last holiday in the Hamptons.

Some of the other guests at the table were still in 'gee whiz' mode. They were first-timers to India and appeared overwhelmed, even astonished by what they'd seen. At a childish level, I couldn't resist boasting—I could afford to. I pointed to the number of (official) billionaires on the annual *Forbes* list. Their jaws dropped. I told them about the incredible pluralities in our society—I was just getting started! Calm down, I told myself at one point. You're sounding American!

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How does one react? There are times (far more frequent in recent years) when I find my heart all but bursting with pride and joy (the sight of our 'Boys' taking a victory lap around the stadium in Jo'berg after the heart-stopping T20 win). Then there are other times when I find myself despairing as the same heart sinks to my toes. People keep talking about Brand India. It is the one topic that gets everyone going. We all have our versions of this amazing brand. If *Condé Nast Traveller* declared India to be the No. 1 tourist destination in 2007, beating Thailand, Italy, Australia

and New Zealand, there is reason for us to rejoice. We were used to being at the bottom of the heap for years—shunned by those who refused to take a chance with their lives in a ‘dangerous land full of dreaded diseases, poisonous snakes and putrefying garbage all over ...’ Suddenly, India has become ‘sexy’? And ‘hot’?

India was dubbed a ‘hardship destination’ for decades. And ‘burra sahibs’ were given generous compensation for accepting a posting here. And now, those very sahibs are flocking here (driving real estate prices through the bloody roof).

**What accounts for this dramatic change? I’d say it is our billionaires who’ve wowed the world. Desi tycoons snapping up gigantic conglomerates (Mittal’s Acelor will always be the benchmark for all the others who followed).** The annual jamboree in Davos, which has traditionally attracted international players, but pointedly marginalized India, is suddenly the place to network with our industrialists ... yes ... the same ones who used to be kept waiting or snubbed outright by snooty American/European businessmen in the past. From a low-key, conservative Ratan Tata to the flamboyant, buccaneering Vijay Mallya, Indian bucks are everywhere. In power, petroleum, aviation, steel, pharma, construction, hospitality and of course, IT industries, Indians are emerging as highly respected world leaders, with the vision and guts to build global empires. From the banking sector to infrastructure, we have managed to impact those who had expressed scorn and skepticism at India’s ambitions.

I was asked to flag off a cavalcade of gleaming Mercedes Benzes, marking the start of 'The India Trail', which would cover 40,000 miles of terrain and establish the German brand still more firmly in the consumers' minds. The only reason I agreed to do so was because it gave me an opportunity to brag about the India story some more. Twelve years ago, Mercedes took a bold step by setting up a state-of-the-art factory at Pimpri (outside Pune). This sent out a powerful signal to the other automobile-makers who were tentatively getting their toes wet, testing the waters before taking the plunge themselves. Not only was Mercedes ready to market its range of cars in India, it was ready to invest in a factory (its first outside Europe). Today, Mercedes is steadily rolling out those reliable cars, and going by sales figures, India is ready to get Merc-ed out.

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It doesn't stop with the Merc. Stand outside any trendy lounge bar in Mumbai/Delhi and you'll see a cavalcade of the latest cars. My eyeballs nearly popped out last year, while waiting for my own car outside 'Privé', an exclusive club in Mumbai. A Bentley glided into the narrow road along the seashore, followed by a flashy Lamborghini. 'Wow ... is this really Mumbai?' I heard a Japanese visitor exclaim, as two young, incredibly well-dressed couples emerged from their respective cars, aware of the admiring looks their spiffy vehicles were attracting. Right next to the swanky club is a small shrine under a peepul tree. I noticed how many hard-core party-goers stopped to say a quick prayer there, before entering the club premises. To any outsider, this may have looked absurd, a total

contradiction. But I found the juxtapositioning an apt symbol for the change taking place.

I will not stoop low enough (like the *NYT* journo) to mock the faith of the uber-chic, uber-sexy crowd streaming in for a night on the town. Because that's the easy part—stereotyping is so hard to resist. I was more interested in the reaction of the *pujaris* who guard the charming shrine round the clock, and keep its immediate surroundings scrupulously clean. The tiled platform under the tree provides an informal meeting-place for locals to sit around chatting, occasionally stopping mid-sentence to gawk at Bollywood and fashion world celebrities trooping in carefully coiffed and coutured for maximum impact. What do they think of these youngsters? Are they dismayed by their skimpy attire? Their 'debauched' ways? Couples kiss openly on that street, most young girls smoke languidly while waiting for the valet to get their cars, and it is obvious some guests are flying high after consuming a magnum or two of Möet. But no. The 'shrinewallahs' look philosophically at the situation and are far from judgemental. '*Yeh sab hota hai ... aaj ka zamana hai ... sab cheez badal gayi hai.*' They take change in their stride without moralizing. Of course, it's not always such a happy story elsewhere in India. But it is still an encouraging sign that people who watch today's flappers blowing up in a single hedonistic night what may well be the former's yearly earnings, do so without anger or resentment. Society-watchers talk about a bloody revolution in the offing. I've been hearing that for fifteen years. Doomsday prophets

predict an uprising of the have-nots, who will strike at the entirely disproportionate distribution of wealth, especially as demonstrated in urban India, where flaunting mind-bogglingly pricey designer labels has become an inescapable exercise of city life.

Frankly, I'm amazed it has not happened so far, since the disparities are frighteningly blatant. Unlike in America during the '80s and '90s, when rich people were mugged in the streets of New York by gang members who coveted the attractive trainers worn by joggers, or crack addicts who pulled Rolex watches off the wrists of their victims after knifing them, nothing of the sort is happening here. In fact, it works the other way: those who long for a good car, good watch, good clothes, stare at people who own them, and tell themselves, 'One day, I'll have all this and more.' An ad line said it all: '*Mera number kab aayega?*' There is hope and longing in that pitch, not jealousy or bitterness.

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The '70s angst (as immortalized by Amitabh Bachchan's Angry Young Man in *Zanjeer* and other popular films) has given way to new-century optimism. Each time the Sensex soars, or our cricketers win, our hearts threaten to jump out of our mouths. **Conspicuous consumption is a clumsy by-product of the commercial boom.** We will perforce have to go through this tedious cycle (à la Western societies in the '50s and '60s) before we settle comfortably into our own groove, our special niche. It's a pity we refuse to take our cues from the disastrous consequences of this cycle as witnessed in the West. Junk food being the chief villain.

Watching movies is something I do compulsively. Over the years I've watched cinema-goers getting fatter and fatter. The proliferation of multiplexes has added to the rampant consumption of unhealthy food. Given the price of a cinema ticket (Rs 200) and the prices of popcorn (Rs 75), plus a cola (Rs 30) and a burger (Rs 95) the average spend per person works out to a hefty Rs 400. For a family of four that's Rs 1,600 spent in one go. Obviously, it's not an issue with them. I watch in horror as people stagger back into the auditorium laden with trays full of food. No wonder Renuka Choudhary, the progressive, outspoken minister for women's issues and child welfare, was seriously considering a ban on junk food-advertising at prime time. If India does not eat smart, we are soon going to turn into a nation of the obese, just like America, where being overweight has become entirely acceptable. People are defiantly fat, even if their arteries are clogged, and young people suffer cardiac arrests. And diabetes.

We've foolishly turned our backs on traditional diets which were, for centuries, based on compatibility factors. Regional cuisine bears testimony to this. The variety and richness of our multi-cuisines show a deep and detailed understanding of balanced nutrition. Snacks like idlis are about the healthiest munchies in the world. Delicious, too. But try telling that to someone who's about to stuff a Big Mac into a wide-open mouth!

The silliness of our attitude was brought home to me when an American food writer from a powerful publishing house asked me to help her out with an assignment. She



was in Mumbai to do a local breakfast-food story and wanted to sample *pohey*—a simple Maharashtrian preparation made of puffed or beaten rice. No restaurant she'd been to had heard of pohey. 'Have people stopped eating it?' she asked, genuinely puzzled at the lack of information on its availability in our gigantic foodie-city. I gave her the names and addresses of two tiny eateries at Thakurdwar, in the old part of Mumbai. I also recommended *thali*, a personal favourite. After some difficulty, she managed to taste both ... and hasn't stopped raving since! I laughed and told her the smart set had switched to bagels for breakfast, muesli, orange juice and omelettes made out of egg-whites. And that was for people who went spinning in the city's many gyms. The others from more modest backgrounds preferred junk food eaten on the run. Nobody had the time to even soak, leave alone hand-grind, the mix needed to make idlis and dosas. Even ready mixes found takers only on weekends. As for pohey and thali, forget it. Families preferred pizzas. Pity.

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Multi-cuisine restaurants dominate the food scene. Which is a world-wide phenomenon, of course. But with the arrival of dodgy Vietnamese, Mexican, Spanish and Italian cuisines, our own food story has taken a hit locally. Ironically, Indian restaurants are doing fantastic business overseas, even if the food served there is customized to suit local palates. Since 'fusion' is the mantra, be it in food or fashion, it is possible to tuck into scrumptious but suspect delicacies, paraded as 'authentic', in far-flung cities of the world. From Curry Houses to Balti Restaurants and

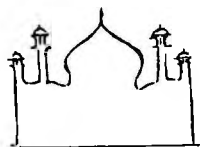
more recently, Coastal India Seafood places to Frontier Dishes, the flavour of India is everywhere. Most of these dishes are unrecognizable to Indians unaccustomed to plated service. **Indian food is like a classical music raga—it takes time to build up to a crescendo.** It is best eaten in a large thali, with *katoris* to hold different flavours, textures and consistencies. An avid gourmet takes time over savouring this symphony. A thali also encourages interactivity in diners by allowing the person to mix-and-match as per individual taste. Nothing is that fixed or rigid. It can be modified upto the last moment.

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How you eat your daal, is upto you. Slurp it like a soup? Combine it with a roti? Drown a heap of rice under it? Throw in a favourite vegetable to further enhance the taste? Add a dollop of ghee or freshly churned white butter? Break pieces of crisp *papad* into it? Drop a tiny piece of pickle into that for a different sort of kick? Dilute it with a little dahi (my father invariably did)? Or mix everything up into a central pile and just dig in? This is the fun and joy of desi cuisine. The dish never tastes the same, just as a *raga* never sounds the same. It's the improvisation that counts.

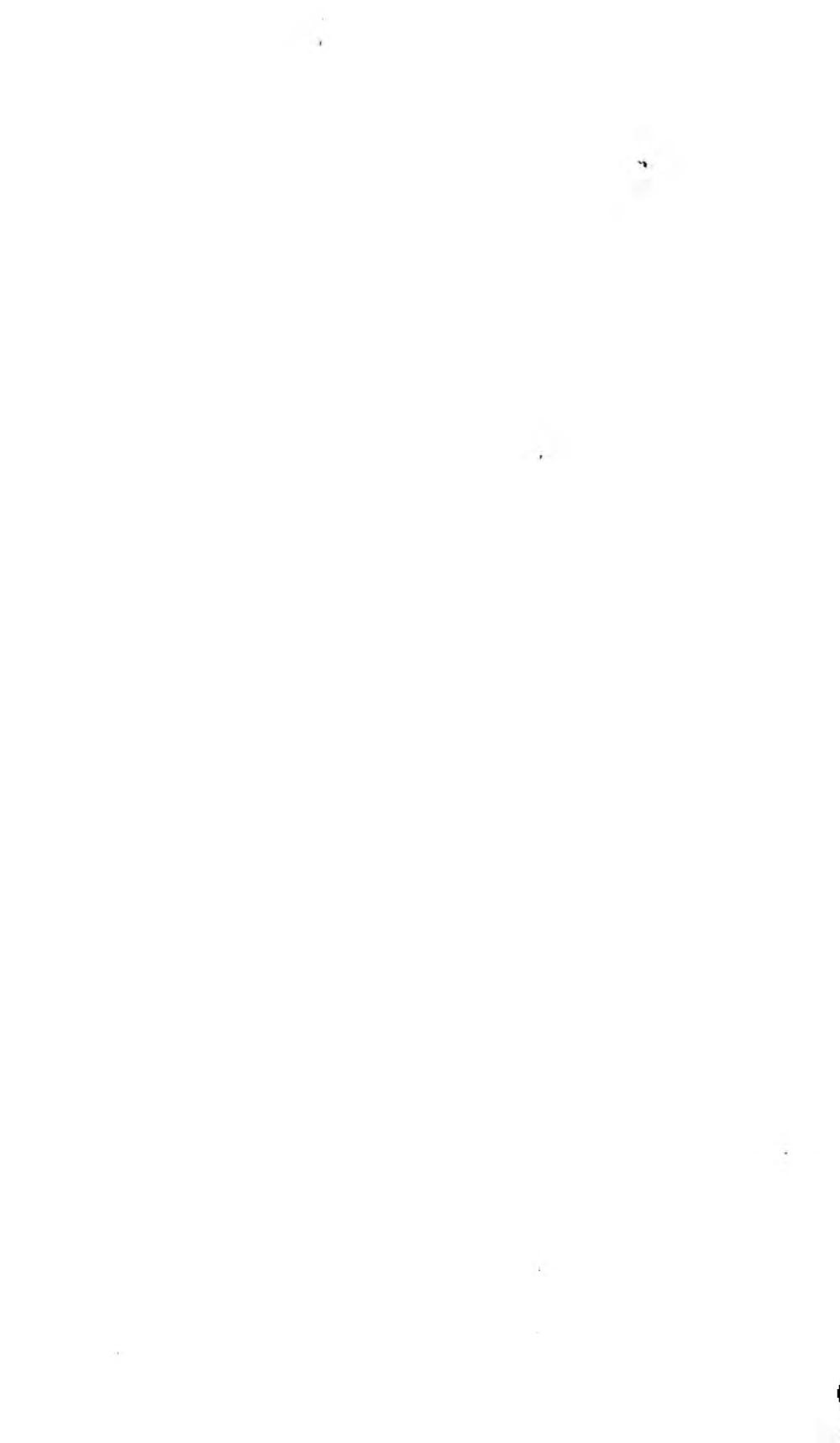
A plated Indian banquet served course by course, therefore, defeats the purpose. It becomes as formal as a symphony by Beethoven, which a conductor can't take too many liberties with. There are zero creative options left to the diner, who is compelled to politely tackle each dish as it is served, that too, with a knife and fork. Whereas true connoisseurs know Indian food is enjoyed best using one's fingers. It tastes different that way, too, and makes for

a far more sensuous experience. Today, even in my own home, we eat our *shorshe-maach* like *saabs*, from a plate, not a thali. And with a knife and a fork. Disgusting!





Netagiri,  
Goondagiri,  
Gandhigiri



Why do our politicians have such a terrible name and image? Why are they reviled across the board? Why does no one trust this breed? And why oh why do we vote for these people if they are indeed so awful? Indians *expect* their leaders to be morally vile and undeniably corrupt. And because we expect them to be bad, they, in turn, resolve to not let us down. Yet, we know we have to live with them, tolerate them ... or get our hands dirty ourselves. Put up, or shut up? Most Indians prefer to keep mum.

Ten years ago, no self-respecting, educated young Indian looked at getting into politics. But that has changed. It's yet another career option, for a few. But for others who've made the quantum leap, it is an opportunity to transform and change the system. The new breed by definition is smart, savvy, educated and straining at the bit to get ahead. Fortunately, this lot has cleverly dropped old hypocrisies and decided to behave like normal, regular people doing a job. When they enter a room, it's without an entourage of fawning *chaprasis* and assorted hangers-on. They look smart and dress smart. The old, caricatural neta (pot-bellied, paan-chewing, gaalis-spewing) has been

replaced by a sharply dressed individual who could pass off successfully as an international businessman, or a Canali model. Has style married substance, or replaced it?

My fear is that this new lot of politicians will not be able to hang on to their constituencies in their present avatars. While urban India is gung-ho about the neta who knows his Pétrus from a *tharra*, 77 per cent of India is uncomfortable with the new lot. When a Priya Dutt appeared in a simple but stylish salwar kameez for her maiden appearance as a parliamentarian, several eyebrows were raised at how 'casually' she had dressed. Ditto for Vijay Mallya who walked into Parliament glittering all the way, making a dazzling debut more suited to the opening of a plush Cartier showroom—men in suits are not a common sight in the corridors of power even now. Though the perfectly hideous safari suit (which reminds me of the African banana republic dictators of the '80s) has been largely discarded, it has been replaced by an equally comical 'designer kurta-with-matching-jacket' look that makes the wearer appear like a *qawwali* singer on an off day.

Women continue to stick to sarees, taking a cue from Sonia Gandhi, whose severe handlooms are meant to convey an illusionary oneness with the masses who turn out to greet this enigma in our midst. She has frustrated all attempts to decode her life and ambitions. In the process, even her harshest critics have given up all attempts to place her in any kind of context. It has been an endurance race which Sonia has won by exhausting all those who were out to beat her. **She survived it all—the attempts to**



**alienate her by constantly referring to her Italian roots (I plead guilty!) and to link her with scandals old and new.** She gave nothing away, and through her silence, sat out her bitterest foes (Sharad Pawar, for one), keeping the seat warm for one of her two children.

The mantle has fallen on Rahul Gandhi's not-so-impressive shoulders and it remains to be seen how his career shapes up. Here's a man who has not really lived in India all that much, and makes no apologies for that. Though he has sweetly booked himself for an 'aerial survey' of the country he barely knows. Let's be kind and call it one hell of a helicopter ride, a high-flier's crash course in basic history and geography. He is being propped up as a future prime minister of India by his dotting mother and her loyalists, not really surprising party-watchers who'd expected the move and anticipated the consequences. Why not Priyanka, ask those who've interacted with the young lady and been impressed by her soft skills. While nobody can guess the real reason why Sonia opted to anoint her son, it is said Priyanka's politics did not find favour with her mother. The official reason given for Rahul's entry into the family business is that Priyanka prefers wifedom/motherhood over the hurly-burly of political engagement. I refuse to buy that theory. Priyanka has a mind of her own. Rahul still behaves like a marshmallow—the archetypal mama's boy. Priyanka has a disarming way of connecting with the people of her parents' constituencies, something that's noticeably absent in her brother.

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But one thing that cannot be doubted is the average

Indian's ongoing love affair with the family. Today, nobody is bothered about Sonia Gandhi's place of birth. Absurd as it sounds, a country of over a billion people willingly accepts her position as the de facto prime minister of India. She has all the power, minus the responsibility. Between her and her son Rahul, it certainly looks as if India will have to endure/enjoy a few more decades of this peculiar relationship. By then, Rahul may marry and produce an heir. And the dynasty will continue.

396 Outsiders are intrigued by the idea of a political dynasty which exerts such an overwhelming influence over the Indian electorate. Why do we make so many concessions for our politicians? Forgive them so easily? Forget past disasters (dams and steel plants instead of education, food and health care, thanks to the skewed Nehruvian 'vision')? And eagerly embrace one generation after another of the same family? Is it because we adore the idea of continuity via an unbroken bloodline, much like European royalty or our Mughal emperors? Does it make us feel more secure in some strange way? Do we tell ourselves it's better to be stuck with a known devil ...?

**How dumb! Everywhere else in the world, people are longing for change.** Hillary Clinton is poised to create history if she becomes the first woman President of the United States of America. Sarkozy has vowed his global supporters with his radical, sweeping policies (and exciting love life). Putin is the poster boy for the sexy, new Russia (like a starlet after a boob job). Even after he 'relinquished' his old position and stage-managed

his successor, Medvedev's win. But here in India, we are too cautious about blasting down old, antiquated political systems perpetuated by the same old people, people who are interested in maintaining the status quo (and hanging on to their chairs, too). Come on, guys, get with it. It's time to say goodbye to all the Pranabs, Arjuns, Natwars, Jyotis and others who want to dominate young India. While listening to them pontificating night after night on news channels, one feels like physically shoving them off their seat and saying, 'Get a life ...'

And then the horror of the alternative scenario starts to get to you. If these stalwarts do indeed move on (like the cricket triumvirate of Sourav, Sachin and Rahul), who will take their place? Well, who knew Dhoni had it in him to lead the Indian team till someone gave him the chance and he went all out to prove himself? That's the message to send out to the seventy-five-year-olds who refuse to take the hint. When that day dawns, a leader will automatically emerge ... Meanwhile, we have to make it clear to the present lot—and that includes Sonia Gandhi and son—that India is ripe and ready for a complete make-over. **It's our Rakhi Sawant moment.** Let's grab it!

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Who's a goon, then?

*Goondagiri* is another matter. Whether frustration levels are indeed going up, when they should be abating (isn't that what's supposed to happen when a traditional society

relaxes and removes ancient sex taboos?), sex crimes are on the increase. Which makes life still harder for women and vulnerable children. And goondas roam freely through urban and rural jungles, preying on victims, doling out 'punishments', maiming or killing those who stand in their way. This is not a happy situation in an otherwise happy scenario. Crimes against society at large, and women in particular, have soared during the past five years. And it would be foolhardy to air-brush this reality, since it doesn't sit well with the Pretty India story.

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Sometimes, I feel, the country is still stuck with old prejudices, like forcing a dusky-complexioned woman to use fairness creams in order to lighten her skin colour and thereby bag a rich husband. Weirdly, men in India have started applying these magic creams with as much vanity, now that they have their own range endorsed by no less a brand ambassador than Shah Rukh Khan himself. If colour continues to be such an issue, how can we talk of progress—real progress?

Goondagiri used to be the staple of Bollywood films twenty years ago. After a lull, it's back as a favourite script, especially after the phenomenal success of *Munna Bhai, MBBS*, which captured the imagination of the nation with its tongue-in-cheek depiction of how a loveable (but lethal) goonda bulldozes his way into acquiring a fake medical degree in order to impress a girl. That the film shrewdly introduced 'Gandhigiri' to counter balance 'goondagiri' is another matter. Sanjay Dutt's character is a local tyrant, bending rules and terrorizing people, before

being bitten by the love bug. Was the film-maker glorifying goondas or merely reflecting the dirty truth? Would Gandhiji have been amused, or outraged, by his representation in the film? And most importantly, does popular cinema really have such unimaginable power over audiences, that a long-forgotten 'Father of the Nation' is now being seen as a modern-day icon by a generation that had turned its back in him?

'Gandhi' is everywhere, these days! Fashion designers have discovered him and use his image in much the same way Che Guevara's continues to be used—on T-shirts and other trendy garments. Gandhi is suddenly very cool. And I'm expecting an international musical staged around the Great Man. A megaproduction that captures the imagination of the world once more (Richard Attenborough's film had a profound influence on audiences worldwide).

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**If Gandhi is being positioned as 'Daddy Cool' and being transformed into a 'Youth Icon' (sweet irony!), there must be a valid reason.** In India, we are seriously short of heroes. We try and create them artificially in order to fill the empty slot. Gandhi is perfect for that. Besides, he's a caricaturist's delight. In much the same way as Mother Teresa. Artists, cartoonists and others can capture both these iconic personalities with a few clever strokes of the pen or brush. Mother had her blue-bordered saree covering her head. And Gandhi, his spectacle frames. So entrenched are these in our minds that nobody makes a mistake in recognition. Both have spun out mini-industries that keep multiplying the images ad nauseam, much like

Andy Warhol's version of Marilyn Monroe. Problems arise when an ignorant graphic artist in, say, San Francisco, foolishly decides to 'misuse' the image on, say, footwear.

We Indians are extraordinarily sensitive about such 'insulting' representation, and there are enough offended NRIs tucked away in the remotest corners of the earth who are only too ready to stage protests and go to court. Aah—we love litigation almost as much as the Americans. And it's not difficult to file the most absurd cases in courts in far-flung districts nobody has heard of. Given that Indian courts are about the most overburdened bodies of justice on earth, it's puzzling why frivolous cases are admitted in the first place. My heart goes out to one of India's pioneering supermodels and beauty pageant winners, Madhu Sapre, who was slapped with an obscenity case (along with eleven others) ten years ago for an ad that featured her in the buff, clad in nothing more than a strategically positioned python! Sapre, now married to an Italian businessman, has to fly into Mumbai each time the case is supposed to come up for hearing. Most times, she's the only defendant present, since the others who live in Mumbai know what she doesn't—the judge may be transferred, the case adjourned etc. etc. And yet, she can't take the chance of a 'no show'. It is cases of this nature, whimsical and of no consequence, that clog our courts.

Where the Mahatma is concerned, an 'insult' can be perceived easily by those who pretend to be supernationalists trawling the universe, looking for similar 'insults' to our great culture. Use and misuse of the

tricolour raises similar issues, and several ignorant/innocent people have got into hot water on account of 'abusing' the national flag. Crazy? Yes ... the Union Jack or the Stars and Stripes regularly feature on bikinis and briefs. Are the wearers seen as traitors? Naah. It's all a matter of perspective. **Superstar Gandhi is the flavour of the world at present. Let us not get foolishly possessive or touchy about the use of his image.** I love it when someone sports a Gandhi tee. Forty years after Che's death, he's everywhere. What's the point of achieving an iconic position if it can't be flogged?

### Three's company

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Narendra Modi, Amar Singh and Mayawati make strange partners. But since this peculiar triumvirate is an important, even integral, part of the present 'India Story', how can we ignore them?

Modi, in particular, is a political phenomenon that defies categorization. If Swaraj Paul can give him a certificate and sing his praises, one wonders whether those of us who've remained consistently critical of Gujarat's chief minister have missed some crucial detail. That he is clever, articulate and ruthless is in no doubt. But outside his own state, Modi has been shunned and reviled as a bigot and dictator, a mini-Hitler, someone who is dangerous to civil society. His admirers see him as a crusader and a champion of the Hindu majority. They point to his abilities as an

administrator who has pulled Gujarat out of the slough of despond. Investment is pouring in. And Modi's trump card is to point out the soaring economy of his state, and the whole-hearted support he gets from the business community. Prosperity is everything. Forget ideology. But the larger question remains: Is Modi good for India? Why does he make everybody so nervous? Without once again going into the horror of Godhra and what followed, I think Modi's place in history will be determined by what he chooses to do in the next five years. The taint and stench of Godhra has already marked the man permanently. How he manages to redeem himself in the incident's aftermath (if that's at all possible) is the challenge.

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Amar Singh is an anomaly, defying categorization. Supporters and friends describe him as shrewd and ruthless, loyal and gutsy. As Mayawati's main target at present, Singh knows he's a marked man, along with his mentor, Mulayam Singh. Mayawati is not known for her mercy. She is an unforgiving foe who can afford to bide her time before striking. Political analysts are waiting to see when the sword will fall on Singh's neck and how many other heads will roll along with his. Nobody disputes Mayawati's blazing future, now that she has co-opted the Brahmins and Thakurs, ensuring a broader voter-base as and when elections take place.

Armchair intellectuals are uncomfortable with the idea of Mayawati representing India's future. Since it seems an inevitability, it might serve us all better if we try and understand Mayawati's mindset, rather than distance



ourselves from this coarse lady whose language is peppered with choice abuses that involve several previous generations of her victims' families. Known not to mince words or spare opponents, Mayawati has demonstrated woman power along with Dalit might. The numbers speak for themselves. **To ignore Mayawati is to ignore India's future. Blinkers need to come off. And for all we know, Mayawati will be just what the doctor ordered. Breath held. Fingers crossed!**

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For most people, much is expected from the next-generation politicians, including Rahul Gandhi. It would be interesting to monitor their performance. The old reluctance and skepticism of those youngsters interested in politics but reluctant to take the plunge, has undergone a subtle but sure change. I meet bright, confident young things barely out of their teens, 'outsiders' for the most part (not from political parties), who want to get actively involved and are far from cynical about the system.

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What daunts them is the money angle. They are aware of the huge monies required to fight an election. They know big bucks fuel wins. Afraid to sell out to richie-rich political patrons, and unable to come up with the resources themselves, they adopt a wait-and-watch approach, which eventually gets them nowhere.

Politics can't be intellectualized in India. The Gucci politician has an extraordinarily naïve understanding of

ground realities. Urban India has a very weak role to play in such a scenario. While thought-leaders and opinion-makers residing in metros delude themselves with their own importance, the truth of the matter is that 'English-speaking' Indians are getting rapidly marginalized, in terms of real influence. Regional TV and regional newspapers have stolen a march over the English biggies, even as they (the English language media) try desperately to hang on to their earlier supremacy. Paradoxically, the IT boom has reinstated English as the premier language, since it is seen as being responsible for India's edge over China in bagging all those BPO contracts. The English we now read, speak and write is uniquely our own. But for these millions of BPO workers, it is merely a tool that has got them their jobs. They *think* in their own language, marginalizing English in a way that is still not fully understood, so new is this development.

**Our Gucci boys don't seem to have grasped this and continue to play the old game, which was dominated by the Doon School *babalog* in Rajiv Gandhi's time, and carried forward by the sons, despite the writing on the wall. Even the older, snooty politician, like a Shiela Dixit, sounds almost comical on television when she holds forth in her chi-chi accent and shows complete disregard for her core constituency, all those UP wallahs who probably don't understand a word of her posh Hindi! Simply put: nobody is impressed by an *Angrezi*-speaking neta anymore. Those days are over. It is almost heart-breaking to hear Sonia Gandhi struggling through**

her tedious Hindi bhaashans, written by speech-writers who want 'madam' to reach out to the unwashed masses. But madam is stymied—understandably so. First, she had to learn English when she came to India as a bride. *Then* acquire a working knowledge of Hindi! Enough to make people believe she is actually most fluent in both!

The champagne communists and socialists from West Bengal and Kerala suffer from exactly the same disadvantage. Hindi is not their language. And their brand of English is impossible to comprehend. I half-joke that the confusion over the commie position on the touchy matter of the nuclear treaty had to do with semantics, not politics. Perhaps a competent interpreter could have resolved prickly issues which had the people of India totally baffled. Who was selling out? The Congress Party to the Americans? Or the commies to China? If only all the debates and counter-arguments had been conducted in a common language! Even an urbane, erudite P. Chidambaram is often caught in a bind when compelled to express himself in what is loosely called the 'National Language'. I certainly don't accept it as mine, even though I speak it reasonably well.

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The new political kids on the block who are already on the scene have not proved themselves so far. They seem a bit too happy and complacent fitting into the system rather than attempting to change it. But since the general disengagement from politics touches this generation as well, the apathy is not hard to understand. Young people in today's India want to make money, not policies. The

'revolution' that one keeps hearing about is not likely to start in Mumbai or Delhi. If there are rumblings in other parts of India, they have not registered strongly enough to impact lives. The overall mood remains upbeat and jaunty. Who needs introspection or dark doomsday predictions, when the markets are going crazy and there is unfamiliar euphoria in the air?

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My father was completely tuned in to this new, aggressive India. At many levels, he was far more accepting of change than I was. He rather liked it and didn't feel excluded in the least. I found that a little peculiar, considering his past—a staunch natinalist supporter and an unabashed admirer of the Nehru–Gandhi dynasty (he hated it if and when I trashed Sonia). When my son Aditya opened a swanky private club in Mumbai along with a partner, my father was the one most keen to check it out. Not as a proud granddad, but as a keen observer of social trends. We walked in well past midnight on what was to be my father's last birthday (he died six months later). I'd warned him the place was dark, noisy, smoky and filled with ultra hip people dancing to a DJ's ear-splitting tracks. That only whetted his appetite further. When we walked in, the average age of the members-only club shot up by forty years! My father took a good look around. The last time he'd been inside a nightclub was perhaps fifty years earlier. He asked Aditya several questions before declaring, 'I like it! Congratulations! You've started something novel ... I've

only seen such places in films. I could never have imagined I'd visit a similar club in real life. And now here I am ... it is fantastic.'

When we left 'Privé', I asked him, 'How come you were not shocked?' He looked at me quizzically. 'Shocked? What nonsense, my dear. This is India in the new century ...' Right. But what about Gandhian–Nehruvian ideals? What about austerity? Sacrifice? He shrugged philosophically before saying, 'Oh ... that was then. This is now.' And we both started to laugh.

Unlike all those foreign journos who gasp and blink at urban excess, implying that Indians have no bloody business to be well off—it's a prerogative solely reserved for 'developed Western economies'. It's possible their words sting because there is truth in the hard-to-reconcile differences that exist between the haves and have-nots. We have lived with disparities, that shock the rest of the world, for decades now. Made our peace with startling anomalies. Buried guilt. Made excuses. Stopped explaining or apologizing. Not because we are desensitized or cruel. It's because we are optimistic and hopeful. **Most Indians today believe they will live to see a better, far more prosperous India. They like to think the next generation will set right the wrongs of the previous one. Everybody is confident that India is poised to make that transformation that will benefit the poor and lead to the sort of inclusiveness that has eluded us so far.**

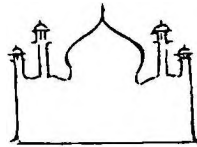
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There are signs of progress—real progress—at all

levels—it depends on a person's perspective. Half-empty or half-full? If anybody wishes to remain focussed on the downside (poverty, disease, lack of education, corruption), well, India has enough horror stories to keep pessimists 'happy'. The mood of the nation, however, is anything but downcast, despite some daunting prospects (I hate statistics!). If one focusses on the upside, even something as small (or big—again, a matter of perspective) as Mumbai's new airport terminals causes the spirit to soar, along with all those countless national and international flights taking off skywards. But if, instead, one chooses to look out of the window of a 747 circling over the city and stare at Asia's largest slum, well then, that will be the story that sticks.

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**India can be maddening. Baffling. Frustrating.  
But boring? Never!**



Nazar  
Lag Jaaye<sup>Na</sup> ...





I am a firm believer in *nazar*. The 'Evil Eye' that sends out negative vibrations of hate, envy, jealousy. Most Asian societies (Egyptian, Turkish, Mediterranean and African, too ... why leave out the Haitian and the Caribbean, Mexican, South American—oh, I guess people in nearly every society outside the charmed circle of rationalists in America, England and Europe) accept practices designed to ward off the inauspicious stare. Amulets, rings, bracelets, charms, necklaces, body markings, strategically-placed objects, you name it, and we have it. The entrance to our home features Mumbai's *nazar* anti-dote—a lemon strung up with green chillies. Sharp and sour. Enough to deter the most determined perpetrator of bad deeds.

Or, so we'd like to believe. It's that easy. Traffic signals in the city are crowded with urchins selling these good-luck charms to protect motorists. Even the fanciest luxury car on the road is likely to have the *limboo-mirchi* combo strung under the front fender, or below the mirror.

Infants (especially little boys) have a *kaajal tika* on their baby foreheads, placed as early as in the maternity home itself. This is done to counter any paranormal 'attack' on the infant. The black dot is supposed to mar the baby's

beauty sufficiently to put off a potential kidnapper or evil spirit who, on spotting the dot, will also be aware that the baby is well-protected by powerful forces.

I was scrupulous about adhering to this entirely irrational practice with my own children—much as I hated to admit it at the time. I would slyly place the black dot in a less obvious spot, not on the babies' sweet little faces. And I didn't discriminate either—the girls, I always felt, needed divine intervention far more. These harmless rituals are charming and as meaningless/meaningful as your own need. Sometimes, when India-bashers are having a field day, I fervently wish there was some way of putting that black dot on India's beautiful face, to take care of the *boori nazar*. That it is very much there, is something I not just acknowledge but live in fear of.

412

Are we flying too high, too soon? Are our rivals out to get us any which way they can? Should we be more discreet, more modest about our many accomplishments? Even Al Gore's Nobel for Peace comes with an Indian connection, Rajendra Pachauri of the Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change. Does it make more sense to deliberately downplay our victories? Restrain ourselves a little? Stop boasting, stop chest-thumping? Retreat into a quieter space and reinforce our wins away from the public gaze? That would be one way of dealing with unprecedented success. The other would be to invite the whole world to the India Party. Yup. Why not? There is much to celebrate. **We have gone smoothly from Poor India to Rich India. From Unsung India to Surprising India.** The old hiccups

suddenly appear just that—hiccups—as India surges ahead at a momentum that is leaving us Indians (even more than the rest of the world) very much out of breath.

An Italian magistrate, who also happens to be a highly successful crime-writer, was interviewing me on the last day of the last leg of his twenty-two day journey through India. Another whistle-stop book telling us how 'exotic' and 'complex' we are? I hope not! Gian Carlo seemed far too intelligent to fall into that silly trap. He'd been taking copious notes and talking to dozens of people. I did my own sales pitch with additional doses of *josh*. India is impossible to categorize, I told him. It needs several lives to fathom. He brought up the inevitable China comparison. he looked particularly crestfallen when discussing India's poverty. I leaned forward (deep eye contact always helps) and said, 'The big difference is that in China poverty has been made invisible. You don't see the poor because they are forced out of sight. They've been shunted out to remote regions to which tourists are never given access. In India, we are dealing with our poverty far more openly. We may not be doing a brilliant job of it, but at least we not marginalizing our poor by pretending they don't exist.'

413

### *Poverty scares Westerners*

It upsets them greatly. I believe it has to do with memories and stories about the two World Wars they survived. The horror of those decades of deprivation, starvation and

torture have not been entirely buried or dealt with. Psychologically, the spectre of poverty scares the hell out of them. Behind that veil of 'sympathy' is panic—'What if this happens to us?'

We, on the other hand, can afford to throw a really unabashed OTT bash for once! No more cost-cutting, no more shopping around for tacky, cheapie party favours. At present, India is very much the belle of the ball, why ruin the magical moment by spoilsport self-denigration?

There's much that begs for serious and immediate fixing. But there's a lot out there worth celebrating, too. Money isn't everything. But in an arena where money does call the shots, India is looking 'hot' (like our Bollywood stars, cricketers and fashion models).

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Like it does for any protective Indian parent, this has me worried. The momentum is moving brilliantly ahead—despite bureaucracy and the awful politicians. French President Sarkozy was the chief guest for the spectacular Republic Day parade. Good move. We need him. The French need us. The chances of the present coalition government hanging in there, precariously or otherwise, are looking good. The commies have backed off (for now), but not before creating dramatic flutters (the Sensex's yo-yo-ing is attributed to the commie factor during the complicated 1-2-3 crisis). Barring the breakout of a nuclear war, or a global calamity, India's position is looking unshakeable. Natural disasters? Well, we live with those. We cope.

And dare I say, in our own clumsy, bungling way, we

seem to do it better than the mighty United States of America (still dealing unsuccessfully with the devastation wrought by Katrina in New Orleans). Our tsunami efforts were not perfect by any standards years ago. But we got on with our lives shortly after, and rehabilitation programmes continue in their own crazy way. The thing is, we bounce back. And fast. How we manage to do that, time and time again, remains an esoteric puzzle. Some say it is in our Karmic coding. We are philosophical enough to handle crises of whatever magnitude, believing it is our dharma to do so with grace and fortitude. Left to ourselves, without the annoying interferences that cripple us (Babudom! Forms in triplicate! Rules and regulations! Damn!), we are incredibly resourceful and innovative. Our problem-solving skills may be considered unconventional by others, but we know exactly how to deploy them when stuck.

415

Survival instincts? Heck ... each day of our lives tests them. And our billion-plus numbers tell the whole story. Today, if we indulge in some much-needed morale-boosting and shameless bragging, we can afford to get away with both. It's a good time to be an Indian. Especially an Indian in India. We have taught ourselves not to get shaken by perceived or real international insults. From being hyper-sensitive, we've become totally cool. Just like those young adults one overhears chatting animatedly in gleaming shopping malls. We finally seem to have got our act together and figured out what we're all about. **We are a delicious bhel-puri, dahi-misal, bisi bele, chorchori, chaat—whatever tickles your palate. The tantalizing tastes**

**of India are finding takers all over the world—metaphorically and literally.**

Let Britons claim that inedible yellow paste as the ultimate Indian ‘curry’ if they wish to. We know better. And our curries defy such easy categorization, such simplification. Just like us! We have thousands and thousands of curries from across the length and breadth of India. Each one unique, delicious and easy to digest. Like us.

416 Sometimes, I purr contentedly and say to myself, ‘Gosh! We’re very attractive people, aren’t we? I must have done something very right to be born Indian.’ These moments used to be rare, very rare, earlier. But during the past two years, I have been purring quite a lot.

Before I start looking like the cat which has swallowed the cream, I do a quick ‘removing the evil eye’ ritual (it involves spit, and you really don’t want to know the details!). Nazar is a delicate superstition. It’s a little like a fond grandmother who refuses to pay compliments to her grandchildren, fearing her love and admiration will attract the dark forces and affect the kids adversely. That restraint applies to receiving compliments from strangers as well. The eyes will glow with pride, but a devoted granny will never openly agree with an outsider’s gush about her brood. ‘God knows what’s in the person’s heart?’ she’ll argue—before hastily changing the subject.

Similarly, I stop myself from going stupidly overboard with the praise, especially when I’m discussing India with foreigners. I used to make mistakes earlier and go blue in

the face explaining, apologizing, defending. These days, I merely shrug ... and smile enigmatically. It's enough for *me* to 'know'. Why brag? *I* don't know what's in anyone's heart, either. As my granny would say, 'How pure is that person's gaze? Can you tell? How black are that person's thoughts? Does anybody know?' I like to think my present reticence has to do with confidence and faith. Both are personal belief systems that don't require propagandist rhetoric.

The young Indian does not have to boast, either. Most don't. Their main problem revolves around *identity*. But even that has solutions. It's a phase, a mere pause. When the country's own identity is undergoing such a dramatic change compacted neatly into a decade, what can one expect from the people who are an intrinsic part of this switchover? I said lightly to a lady who expressed her anxiety over her children's reluctance to dress 'Indian' during festivals. I told her young India was bland and featureless, like blancmange. All wobbly and uncertain. But, so what? If her daughter prefers jeans over any other outfit and her son speaks 'American', not 'English' or Hindi or any other Indian language, so be it.

417

Global is as global does

The faster young Indians integrate into the new borderless world, the better will be their opportunities. We will all be hurtling across continents and putting down roots

(temporary, of course) wherever our fancy dictates.

Not all these decisions will be based on good sense or economics. **Unlike their forefathers, who didn't dare, this generation has gone beyond mere daring. It is living its dreams.** Those dreams may baffle/annoy the previous generation, but that's what social change is all about. India's youth realizes it is a vital part of the India story. There is a special thrill in knowing you are drivers of dramatic, revolutionary, sweeping alterations that are likely to impact lives over the next hundred, even two hundred years.

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Talking to an enthusiastic engineering student at an Id dinner, I was riveted by his take on the situation. No matter that, as we tucked into delicious biryani, a bomb had exploded in Ludhiana, killing half-a-dozen people. As he was a young Muslim professional, I asked him what he felt at that moment. He shrugged, not indifferently, but pragmatically. 'It happens. It is sad. But it happens ... is happening. All over the world, not just in India. We have to address the problem. Ignore the symptoms, and we are doomed! Our terrorist-watch mechanisms aren't good enough. We have to tackle that issue first. Demand answers from elected representatives. And if those answers aren't good enough, stop cribbing and get into a more pro-active mode. Join politics. Or, at least motivate the people around you to get more involved. In Mumbai, students are too passive and disengaged. Not entirely a bad thing. I mean, look at Delhi University! But if more students became aware of their rights, and India focuses on basic and higher



education for all, things are bound to change.'

I liked his optimism, and the fact that the news of the blast had not unhinged him. His response was measured and rational. If more Indians thought like him, behaved like him and remained as positive, I'd be exhausting a kilo of kaajal a day, putting those black spots on everything in sight!

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*Dil Chahta Hai* that I could be around for the *next* sixty years just to watch India soar still higher. That it is going to do so, is indisputable. At least, in my besotted mind. I also believe strongly that the new Golden Age for India is here. If Emperor Ashoka heralded its dawn during his reign (273 BC to 232 BC, it is believed), it's up to the present generation to reignite long-buried pride and passion for a glorious future. There is really no excuse, no reason why we can't regain all that was once ours.

419

**Nothing's gonna stop us, now, is becoming a familiar and very cheery refrain on campuses.** Parents who agonize over their children drifting away and forgetting their 'Indianness' (I am one of those!) must teach themselves to realign and rethink their own priorities. 'Being Indian' itself has different connotations from what it had during Mahatma Gandhi's time. Wearing khadi has become a fashion statement for the elite, with no connection to nationalism. The youth may appear 'directionless' to us but in that same state lies their strength!

They can afford to take their time before taking the plunge, be it into a vocation or marriage. The options and opportunities are unlimited. When I hear stories about students from the most economically backward communities working their way up and finding wonderful careers in, say, hotel management, I applaud them.

These sorts of *hat ke* opportunities did not exist in my time. Studious siblings and contemporaries opted for safe, steady but *boring* careers, since their own parents had endured years of uncertainty, and they didn't want to repeat the experience.

420

But, look at our youngsters today—they may give the appearance of being unmotivated bums, taking ten years to graduate and ten more to find proper jobs. But in fact, they are actually living life far more fully than my own anxious generation. Their thinking is bold, out-of-the-box and vastly stimulating. Their outlook is adventurous and daring. They challenge the status quo all the time, and take the sort of crazy chances we never did—or could. My reactions go from panic to admiration, even envy at times. What a life! Look at their body language, man! That says it all. They walk tall. They strut, not shuffle. The gait is brisk and confident. Gone is the typical 'Indian Stoop' and apologetic demeanour. How terrific a shift is that?

**Don't worry. Be happy.** Some of us cluck-cluck our disapproval and say self-righteously, 'Oh, but look how lazy they are. They do nothing but eat and sleep. Where will these people be twenty years from now? Their values are hopeless. They smoke, drink, have indiscriminate sex,

do drugs, show scant respect for elders, can't speak any Indian language correctly, are indifferent to history and tradition, live selfishly, dress absurdly, waste money ... they are gone cases ...'

Well, some are. But most are not. If they appear to be doing zilch, they can afford to! Their supposed irresponsibility is actually an important period of taking stock. We had no such luxury—true. But why grudge it these guys if they have it in abundance? Again, it's another demonstration of India's growing prosperity.

Life really is a beach for the lucky Indians born in the '80s and '90s. They find it hard to believe the stories told to them by their parents and grandparents. Their India has arrived! Their India is a superstar! A big player on the global scene. Mega success fuels mega ambitions. Today, any and every Indian can dream big and reach for the sky.

421

Talk to that *chaiwallah* boy in the modest, roadside canteen. Listen to him boast about how he'll own a trucking company when he grows up. He believes it's possible. He is as fully invested in India as that ambitious entrepreneur who plans to make a killing in the IT field. Both have a bloody good chance of making it.

The notion of success itself has undergone so much change. This new-found buoyancy is based on sound fundamentals, despite the misgivings of India-watchers who'd like the bubble to burst—sooner rather than later.

Talking to a European ambassador, I was amused by the man's arrogance, as he sniggered superciliously at the euphoria surrounding the Sensex (it was at 19,000 that

crazy night). 'Speculation—that's all it is,' he pronounced, even as I contradicted his sweeping generalizations and provided a few facts and figures to substantiate my claims. He looked unconvinced and lofty, as he talked about his experiences with Indian business people. 'I was in Bihar recently ...' he said, recycling the tired observations on the lawlessness and chaos there. 'At one point, we lost our police escort, and I can tell you, it was a terrifying feeling to be on those awful roads without protection.' I pointed out how similar his Bihar experience sounded to goings-on in his own country. He hastily changed the subject and said he loved wearing kurtas during Delhi's hot summers—'it's a good costume ... I like it. But I definitely don't like the way Indian designers cut our jackets.'

"Our" jackets, Mr Ambassador? What do you mean?' I demanded. He went on (rather undiplomatically) to establish European supremacy over tailored blazers and suits. 'Those are constructed for European body shapes. I've given a chance to some of your best designers. Sorry—they can't get it right, no matter how hard they try. Our chests, our silhouettes are different ... Indians are totally flat-chested ...' Oops. Has the man seen SRK's six-pack or Salman's impressive 'cleavage'?

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'I don't want to let go of India,' a beautiful woman from Mumbai said to me with tears in her eyes. Married to a European for the past five years, she now lives in a small

town in Austria with a husband who adores her. Though she visits Mumbai frequently (at least thrice a year), she is unable to get enough of a fill on each trip. 'I miss everything about our crazy country,' she confessed over a lassi. 'My life in Austria couldn't be more luxurious. I have every imaginable comfort—including a driver and a maid—which is rare in Europe. My husband's family loves me and I love them, too. But when I'm in Austria, I long for India ... when I'm here ... I long to return. Is there something wrong with me?'

We both laughed it off, and I teased her about her handsome husband, saying, 'Get him to come to Mumbai. His business is bound to boom still further. Look at what's happening here ...

You'll be able to afford *three* chauffeurs and *five* maids.'

I was half-joking. There was a time when Indian girls of a marriageable age would have given anything to marry a foreigner and settle overseas. It was considered a one-way ticket to a better life.

Today, the situation has reversed. Non-Resident Indians seeking 'Suitable Boys' for their daughters, look eagerly for alliances in India. 'Everything is happening in India now ... good food, good homes, good education. Why look anywhere else?' It makes me chuckle.

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*Roti, kapda aur makaan*. Basics. The three fundamentals many more Indians can finally start taking for granted. Food. Clothes. Shelter. It can't get more organic than that. 'When stomachs are full, poetry dies,' I once heard an impoverished poet lamenting. What a romantic notion. But how inaccurate.

424 Hunger has haunted India for far too long. Today, perhaps for the first time in Independent India's sixty-year-old history, hunger has been dealt with. There's enough food for all. Starvation deaths have little to do with the quantity of food available, as Nobel laureate Amartya Sen has reminded the world in his brilliant book dissecting famine. Food—that small four-letter word, is one thing every Indian should be able to count on as a given. This is nothing short of a miracle. Self-sufficiency in this crucial area has given every Indian the confidence that a full belly provides.

Not that starvation can be wished away all that easily. Nor can corruption (which leads to starvation deaths in the first place). But today, every Indian knows food is available in plenty. **That shortages are manmade.** That no child needs to go hungry because of lack of food in the country. Like Sen points out, it isn't about the availability of food, it is the lack of a will to ensure food gets to the mouths that most need it. Balwadi children in strife-torn Kashmir Valley are given bowls of pulses and rice that have rotted due to the negligence of the government officers in charge of distributing grains to these kids.

The women protest on television that the meals are inedible, leading to sickness if consumed. But nothing

happens to those responsible for this disgrace. It remains a TV story. A 'meaningful filler' between clips of the launch of a flagship Gucci store in south Mumbai and quotes from Shah Rukh Khan taking a swipe at Sony Pictures for distributing a rival's film ('Indians will watch my movie, and Americans will go to see the other one'). All three images are a vital part of the mega India story in their own ways.

Gucci in Mumbai? Sure. There are enough eager buyers ready to shell out two lakh rupees for a limited edition bag. SRK reinforcing the 'Indian' component in his hardsell. Yup. *Chak de, India!* wasn't the top grosser of 2007, for nothing.

Kids in Kashmir rejecting substandard food? That, too. India may be shining, glowing and glittering. But the warts will take longer to disappear. The important thing is that the overhauling process has begun—falteringly, perhaps. But it is definitely underway.

425

Ironically, I received a poignant e-mail from an Italian friend who lives in India, and has been here for over thirty years, shuttling between Pune and Goa. He was on a short visit to Italy in order to get his paperwork sorted out before coming back. The tone of his e-mail struck me as being inadvertently appropriate. 'I find Italy so vulgar after India. Especially the images on television ... the way people dress, drink and eat these days.' Reading these lines, I thought of several grand evenings I'd been to in Mumbai/Delhi over the past five years. They could be described as 'vulgar' too. Glamorous or vulgar? What a tightrope we are forced to walk these days!

At the end of it all ...

But despite these anomalies and aberrations (which will soon be absorbed and accepted on a broader level), the 'Indianness' at the heart of India still exists. And will continue to thrive, because we are an emotional, sentimental people deep down. The *show-sha* is also a part of our sweet little selves. When we make money, we want the world to know! We like to show it ... flaunt it. Yes, often in a 'vulgar', obvious way.

426

But there is innocence in these acts of showing off. For so many decades, we felt there was nothing worth exhibiting. We'd become a nation of dejected defeatists. We won nothing. We lost everything. Even our prowess in hockey, which was once the country's only sporting hope at international events (we were world leaders till other international teams re-mastered the game and thrashed us). We shuffled around. Our heads were rarely held high. We walked slump-shouldered. And spoke in defensive tones. My God! We even looked different. Bingo! I know what it was—we looked *poor*! That was it. Poor. That dreaded and dreadful word that has defined our identity thus far.

I remember a foreigner talking to me at Frankfurt airport while waiting in the lounge for a delayed flight to take off. After a few minutes of 'airport conversation', he asked heartily, 'So ... where are you from?' When I replied, 'India', he looked startled. 'India?' he kept repeating, disbelief written all over his florid face. Finally, he couldn't help himself and blurted, 'Oh my God! But ... but ... you



don't *look* poor!' I laughed and felt sorry for the guy. I also wanted to sock him and say, 'Come over to my part of the world, buddy. There are thousands and thousands of people there who could buy you over ... along with the airline you work for.'

That isn't likely to happen these days. And even if it did, I wouldn't feel outraged at the stranger's audacity. I'd feel one up and attribute the remark to envy, not ignorance. India is so 'up there' and even 'out there', it's impossible to miss its presence globally. It's a terrific feeling of vindication. I feel like Tiger Woods or Roger Federer after a particularly challenging win. We've had to fight our way to our present position. We've done so on our own terms.

Our biggest triumph remains our unshakeable faith in democracy, as demonstrated in election after election. Rigging? Booth-capturing? Poll violence? Murders, kidnappings ... you name it, we've endured all that and more. But that has not prevented the vast electorate (the biggest in the world) from exercising its right to get the leadership it wants. **Perhaps we have not ourselves realized the power of that vote, since we've accepted it as our absolute right. Lucky us!** What does that sparrow hopping freely around the windowsill in search of discarded wheat husk know about the misery of that bejewelled cockatoo, chained to its cage, while the mistress feeds it pomegranate seeds from a silver bowl?

*'I want to break free,'* sang Freddie Murphy alias Farrokh Bulsara, the talented singer who represented 'Queen'. The song became his anthem—but for the wrong reasons.

Freddie is dead, but my guess is he was dying to break free from sexual shackles and assert his right to opt for same-sex love. Murphy had broken free from his Indian roots and turned his back on India, assuming a borrowed identity that served him well in London—but from which he couldn't really escape. I wonder whether Freddie would have been as ashamed to be identified as an Indian today. The India Wave is a great one to be riding on, as all those profiting from it will hasten to tell you.

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428 My own story is the story of India. And I'm proud to tell it. Sixty is the new forty, I'm told. And I'm only too happy to seize that description. But not before making a small confession. I love my age and am perfectly happy to acknowledge it. But like any sixty-year-old, I sometimes wish I was twenty ... even thirty years younger. Most things, I would've done the same way, but some things I'd definitely have done differently, had I the option and advantage of turning back the clock.

**Sixty is a great time to take stock. There are wonderful years still ahead, with much to anticipate and look forward to. And there are six crowded decades to look back on ...** if the corners of the mouth turn up in a smile at most of the memories, it's a sign of a life well lived. Give or take the usual crises. But if the corners obstinately stay down, then, my friends, it's not such a great story to narrate to grandchildren.

I grew up with India. I made my mistakes with India. And today, I also owe a huge debt to India. I am what I am (for better or worse), I am who I am (ditto), thanks to the country of my birth. I wanted this book to be a personal journey—as much into myself as into India. In the writing of *Superstar*, I discovered a lot about my own life, as I tried to understand life in India. What I sought to do was write a passionate love letter to the most beautiful country on earth. But even the most ardent love affairs have moments and periods of dissent, disagreements, fights and rage. So it is with me and India.

The love letter contains several reprimands, some sharp, others gentle. There was no other way to let my passionate feelings be known, without expressing the truth as seen from my involved and far-from-objective perspective.

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The India of my dreams is almost here. But let me also say, that even through hellish times, I never once doubted its existence. I knew that the idealized, idyllic India I fantasized about would become a reality during my lifetime. 'Keep the faith', is such a charming and irresistible phrase to respect. I can only say, I did keep the faith. Even during those awful times when it looked as if there was no hope left (Babri Masjid, Godhra, the assassinations of Indira and Rajiv Gandhi, the Bombay blasts, the tsunami ... several more, but none as powerful or macabre).

Today, when I talk to my children about 'their' India, they ask, 'Why do you call it "ours"? Doesn't it belong to you, too?' I don't answer. I don't need to. At sixty, you learn to give away all that you hold most precious. The gifts you pass on at this stage are the ones that make the difference.

For they are given with the fulness of your heart, and minus any expectations. India belongs to the young. It is rightfully 'their' India, and they should be intensely proud of it ... cherish it. For it is a rare gift that has come to them with no strings attached. Like the best gifts always are.

One only hopes and prays that this new generation of bright and beautiful Indians values its extraordinary legacy ... enriches it.

430 India is such a maddening enigma. The more you think you know it, the more it frustrates you. It changes rapidly, constantly, taking new avatars as it deftly recolours itself, chameleon-like, to match shifting attitudes, global tilts. No fixed rules in India! Everything depends on the situation. Foreigners find these variables frustrating. But we love our many faces, for without them, we wouldn't have survived. I love that about us—our amazing ability to adapt to any kind of change.

In Bollywood parlance, this is aptly described as 'setting'. That delicious word accommodates virtually every need and situation.

Nearly everything in life is about 'setting'. Need to meet a movie star? Politician? Top corporate honcho? No worries. 'Setting kar do ...' Which could mean so many things—find the right contact, bribe someone, make an emotional

appeal, *kuch bhi*. Nothing is impossible in good old India.

I phone. You phone?

Yes—it happened—the iPhone was cracked within weeks after its worldwide launch and now every gizmo-addict has bought one from the vibrant grey market at half the cost. Terrible? Of course. But inventive, wicked and ingenious, too! It's like that with almost anything. Ask a villager you might meet at a highway stop-over if he can find someone to fix a laptop that's acting weird. He may never have seen a laptop or even heard of it. Is he going to shake his head and say 'No'? Forget it. He will eagerly offer to take you to someone who knows someone who has fixed 'thousands' of laptops ... just last week! It might be a wild goose chase ... but you know what? It could also turn out to be a mini-miracle. If the 'setting' works out, the man will actually lead you to that talented gentleman sitting at a rickety desk next to the village chaiwallah in possession of unimaginable skills at fixing laptops!

431

It is this very never-say-die attitude that makes India incredible. 'Impossible is nothing', an Adidas ad reminds the world. In India, we live by that mantra, never mind how daunting the task! Have brain. Will attempt. Not for us the coyness of saying, 'Well ... it's not a subject I know much about.' Rarely will an Indian confess to not knowing something. Ours is a marvellous nation of *sabjantawallahs*. Everybody is an expert.

We have an opinion on everything. And we aren't embarrassed to go right ahead—often, recklessly—where other, more cautious, people sensibly wouldn't. Core competence? Don't be silly. How restricting is that! All-round competence—that's what we excel in. Often, the consequences that follow from such a gung-ho attitude are disastrous. But that doesn't stop a soul from trying.

432 Contrast that with the 'correctness' adhered to by other cultures. A doctor who will not touch a dying accident victim, even on humanitarian grounds, out of fear of malpractice suits/loss of his licence ... even because he has a degree in a highly specialized field, maybe inner-ear surgery, and will not waste it on ailments that don't require it. The patient can bleed to death while the paperwork is being processed, but nobody will touch his person. Are we just more instinctive in our responses? Not always the best thing, but still better than a cold, clinical attitude that adheres to rules, rules, rules.

There is some method in our madness, too. Which is why Indians succeed in alien environments, using native ingenuity and inventiveness to stay alive, get ahead.

Yes, we actively annoy people in an adopted land by our far-from-endearing desi habits—we spit, scratch, belch and pass wind in public without the slightest self-consciousness. We plead guilty. These are national traits that need to be addressed and modified since nobody finds them anything but offensive. Perhaps the neo-Indians who are global globs, blending seamlessly into the international circuit, will be more conscious of tailoring their social

behaviour to conform to what's universally acceptable.

One can already see this change taking place, as young adults squirm, pull faces and sharply correct parents and grandparents who burp contentedly after a hearty meal in a posh restaurant. My heart breaks a little, as the older folks shrink, look shamefaced and humiliated. In their time and setting, an audible belch was considered a compliment to kitchen staff. Hosts waited to hear it at the end of a meal. Suddenly, age-old habits are being rudely challenged by our sophisticated internationalists, leading to hurt and alienation.

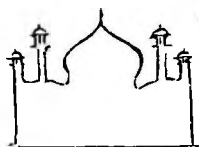
These may appear to be small, inconsequential issues. But in fact, it's the Indian Belch that is the benchmark of a society in transition. When the belch goes, a lot more will go with it, without our realizing as much. The belch was a symbol of a passing era, when we could be 'ourselves'. Today, we are uncertain about that identity. We no longer know how to define ourselves. Like Bollywood's child-like hankering for an Oscar, the rest of us also seek approval from outsiders. Perhaps India will turn into aspic; bland, colourless, flavourless? Personally, I hope and pray that never happens. Our eccentricities are far too precious to abandon. After years of both struggle and apathy, India has joyously rediscovered itself. Its secret strengths. Its forgotten assets. India has found its suppressed voice. Its buried ambitions. Most importantly, India has recognized its precious resource—its people. When those billion-strong people join forces and sing Iqbal's inspiring anthem, '*Sare jahan se achcha Hindustan hamara*', the heavens will

stop to listen. Global superpower? That's us. So now, you know the answer to question: 'Where's the party tonight?'

It's right here.

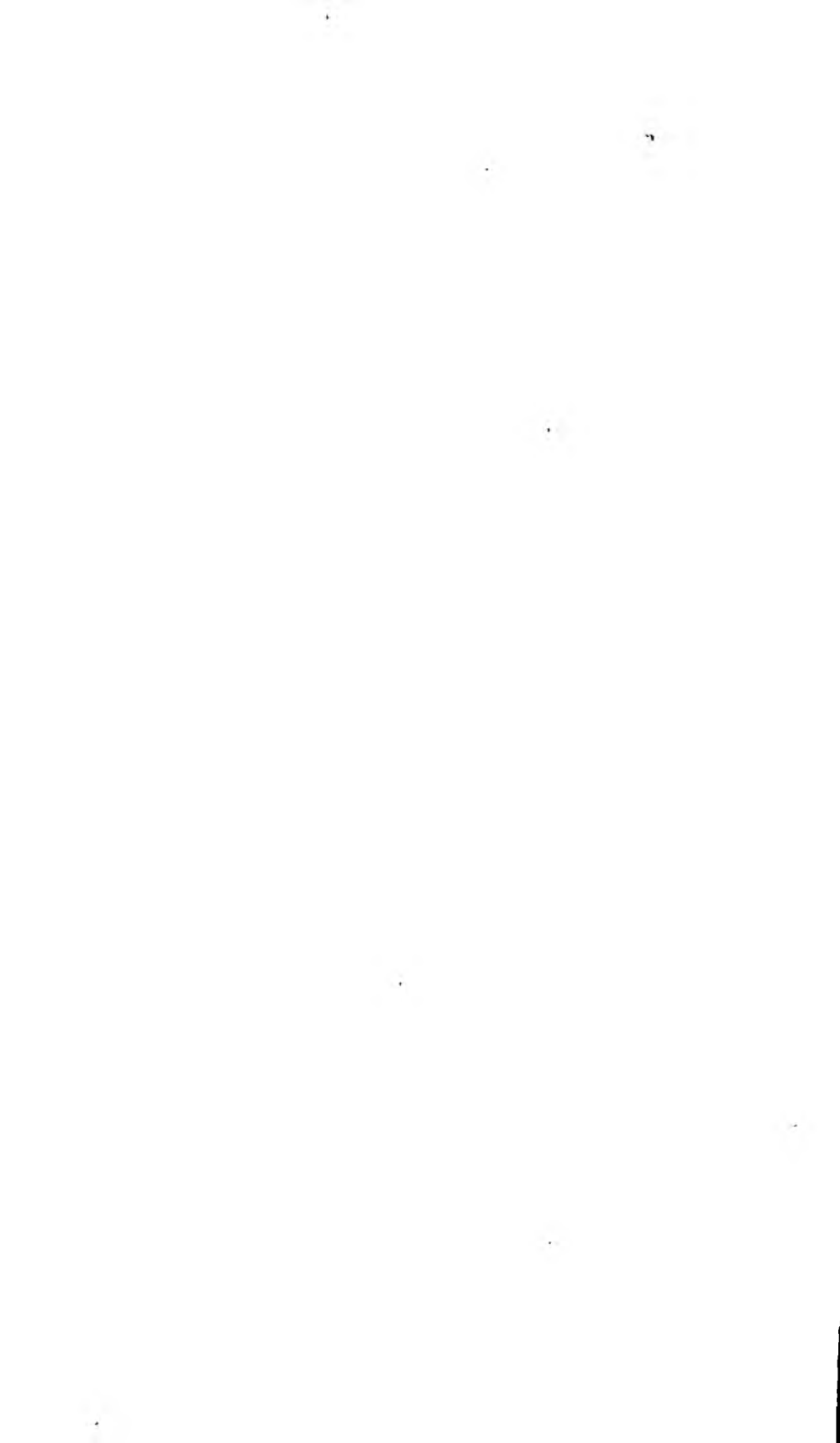
Right now.

And the whole world is invited!





## Epilogue



I'm writing this during a very auspicious period—'Ashtami' marks the eighth day of the Durga Puja festival. The goddess is visiting us for an all-too brief period—just ten short days. In my immediate neighbourhood, there are five awesome images of the all-seeing, all-forgiving Devi installed in imaginatively decorated pandals. Each evening, I can hear the sound of aartis, when hundreds of devotees gather to rain marigolds on the deity during Pushpanjali, as priests clad in fine-spun dhotis conduct the rituals to the blowing of conch shells, the clash of cymbals and the mellow thunder of *dhaks*. The air is filled with fragrant dhoop that stings the eyes and causes young children to cough while keeping up the rhythmic chanting with elders. Women clad in exquisite Dhakai sarees, with bright red sindoor in the parting of their hair, close their heavily Kohl-lined eyes and pray fervently, confident in the knowledge that the awe-inspiring goddess, who has slain countless demons, will listen carefully to each plea and oblige the believers with generous boons.

In such a charged atmosphere, it is impossible to remain untouched or unmoved. I stop whatever I'm doing, to shut my eyes and surrender to the enchanting moment. It

is a feeling of such completeness. For the duration of the aarti, I am entirely at peace. As are millions of others like me, no matter which puja pandal they may be visiting in whichever city. Soon, the chanting will be replaced by film songs blaring over the sound system. But the mood will endure, not missing a beat. Young girls in gorgeous Navratri ghagras, will emerge from their homes to dance the night away, with equally colourfully dressed swains from the locality. This is how it has always been for centuries. This is how it will remain ...

Like a lot else about India.

438 Today, more than ever, I miss my mother. The closest thing to Durga, in her unique way. Her demons and battles may have been terrestrial but the subtext of her struggle and eventual triumph was the same.

Soon, it will be Diwali, the Festival of Lights. And I shall miss her still more ... With her has gone a priceless legacy of Maharashtrians delicacies which she so laboriously prepared, seated on a wooden platform in a simple kitchen, with her own austere dressed, widowed mother by her side, painstakingly supervising the proceedings. From a large iron *kadhai*, filled with boiling oil, would emerge crunchy *chaklis*, delicious crisp *chirotis*, spicy *chivda*, frilled *karanjis*, *boondi ladoos* held together with perfectly balanced sugar syrup, besan ladoos with pure ghee, pungent *sev* ... and—the pièce de résistance—sweet and sour *anarsey*, crusty on the outside, mushy and yielding within.

Their hands would be red and scalded at the end of

four intense days of moulding ladoos, stirring spices, kneading hot mixtures of dough and masalas, coercing fried puffed rice through gigantic sieves, but never would there be any evidence of fatigue.

So many years later, I regret I did not participate more fully in the activity or bother to record those secret family recipes. Those are treasures lost to me forever. And with their loss comes the realization that my own children, and later their own, will have no knowledge, no memory of this valuable tradition. And several traditions as precious and priceless as this one. There are no substitutes for legacies that knit and bind cultures and communities in such subtle and profound ways. Who can put a price on this?

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Even as I continue writing, I note my own paltry preparations for Diwali, most of which are remote-controlled. I fear I have turned into an NRI (Non-Recognizable Indian), even without leaving our shores! Gone is the time the house would be emptied room-by-room, and hand-washed top to bottom. Right now, I can hear a vacuum cleaner whirring noisily as our hyper-excitable Irish Setter Keira cowers in fear under a sofa. The sweetmeats will be bought from a store in Thakurdwar, everything pre-ordered and pre-packed. Like a takeaway pizza. There will be no Diwali feasting at my parents' home, no dahi-pohey to relish either. The familiar, annual venue for festive family gatherings is now joyless, dark and empty, after the last link—my father—passed away. Rangoli? Well yes—but of the stick-on variety. Who knows anymore how

to trace intricate patterns on the floor with rice powder? I certainly don't. *Diyas*? Sure. But no oil wicks since they stain marble floors. How about tea-candles, instead?

Our modern lives have provided quick and easy options which ease our celebrations. Except that we have fewer and fewer people to celebrate with.

Soon, we'll get used to it. We get used to everything. Ten years from now, we'll wonder what the fuss was all about. Is it so awful to send and receive Diwali SMS-es and e-mails? Are electronic greetings less sincere? Does anybody care whether one sends Belgian chocolates instead of home-made mithai? Or that the traditional Diwali bath has been replaced by a quick shower using spa products instead of fragrant oils made out of crushed chameli blossoms or rose petals?

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Turn, turn, turn

Change—sudden and dramatic change—can either be viewed as cataclysmic, catastrophic, or challenging in a positive way. Today, India is at a crucial crossroads. There's no looking back ... the momentum is such. Yes, India is unstoppable. And has stepped into a future that is seductive and tantalizing.

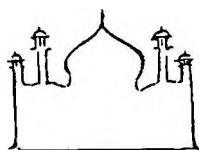
'What could threaten India's rise?' I was recently asked. And my response was simple. Any threat, as I see it, is not external but internal. Today, we can deal effectively with any force that challenges us militarily or economically. I

am not as confident of our own societal revolution which is taking place, perhaps subliminally, but surely. India's biggest strength has always been its sense of family. That beautiful word *kutumb* is too delicate and evocative for literal translation. What other word can fully capture the sublime essence of the sentiment that lies buried in the intimacy of *kutumb*? 'Family', in its deepest, broadest sense, has provided India its backbone. There can be no underrating of that structure. Through centuries, the great Indian family has provided the thread of continuity for the social fabric of our highly complex society. Withstanding assaults, overcoming invasions and colonization. And, in 10,000 years of its history, never invading another.

Today, that same fabric, that same structure, the very foundation of our society, stands threatened, as India rapidly alters itself to compete in a world driven by materialism, consumerism and God knows which other sort of 'isms' that will inevitably get thrown up in the race to the top. The one 'ism' that has been India's staple—spiritualism—remains virtually intact, thank the Lord, even if its present definition has undergone a dramatic change. The challenge, then, remains India's indomitable ability to succeed spectacularly despite the odds. Divisiveness, religious bigotry, terrorist threats, disintegration of family and galloping economic ambitions—those are all there, but we deal with each, in turn, with endurance.

And as long as Indians keep their karmic faith and irrepressible ability to hope, dream and achieve, chances are the next century will indisputably belong to India. And

the old-fashioned, irrational traditionalist that I am, doesn't mind confessing I'm touching wood and praying to Ganesha to make that a reality—preferably during my lifetime! From this point on, every Diwali is going to be a great Diwali ... Let there be light ... lots and lots of light. And unlimited *shanti*. Rejoice!





# Glossary

Aam janata: the common man

Aarti: Worship with fire

Aapam: Jaggery and wheatflour sweet

Aapro: Our own

‘Aapun idharrich rahega’: We’ll stay right here’

‘Aaj ki Raat’: Tonight

Ab Mumbai door nahi: Now Mumbai is not far

Achchi: Good

Agarbatti: Joss-stick

Ajeeb: Weird

Aloo sabzi: Potato curry

Ameerlog: The rich

Anarsey: Traditional sweet

Angrezi: English

Apsara: Celestial women of great beauty often sent by the  
gods to distract meditating sages, lest they demand too  
great a boon at the end of their trance

Asana: Posture in yoga

Ashram: Place of religious retreat

Babalog: Children

Babudom: From ‘babu’ (clerk); a clerical culture; red-  
tapism

‘Badnam ho jaati hai’: ‘It gives us a bad reputation’

Bahu: Daughter-in-law

Bandobast: Security arrangements by the police

Bandh: Strike, literally 'closed'

Bandgala: High-necked men's tunic

Baat: Word

Beedi: Tobacco leaf rolled into a cheap cigarette

Begum: Urdu for 'wife' or high-born lady

Beta: Son

Beti: Daughter

Bhaanda: Ploy

Bhagwan: God

Bhang: Cannabis

Bharat: India

Bhaashan: Lecture

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Bhasha: Language

Bhel puri: Roadside snack of mixed ingredients

Bhelwallah: Streetside seller of savouries

Bhog: Food blessed by the deities

Bindaas: Straightforward, in-your-face

Bindi: Dot worn on the forehead by Indian women

Biryani: Pilau with meat and saffron

Bisi bele: Spicy rice dish from Karnataka

Boori: Bad

Boori nazar: Evil eye

Bustee: Slum

Chaat: Highly-spiced, piquant street food preparations

Chacha: Father's brother

Chachee: Father's brother's wife

'Chak de, India! Aaj jeet hamari': Up, up, India! Victory is

ours today'

Chakmak: Glitz, shine

Chakkar: Route, literally 'circle'

Chakli: Savoury snack

Chamcha: Sycophant, literally 'spoon'

Chamchagiri: Sycophancy

Chai-paani paisa: Small bribe, literally 'money for a little tea and water'

Chaiwallah: Tea-vendor

Chalta hai: Anything goes

Chapatti: Round unleavened bread

Chaprasi: Lower office help

Chappal: Slipper

Charpoy: String-cot, literally 'four-legged'

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Ccha: Dismissive sound

Chhota: Small

Chhutti: Leave, holiday

Chillar: Small change

Chiroti: Puff pastry; Maharashtrian Diwali specialty

Chivda: Spiced rice flakes

Chorchori: Mixed vegetables cooked Bengali-style

Choli: Abbreviated blouse

Churidar: Tight trousers falling in creases

Chowki: Square, police station

Crorepati: Zillionaire, literally 'owner of a crore rupees'

Daal: Lentil soup

Dadagiri: Rule by hoodlums

Dahi-misal: Maharashtrian snack, like bhel puri

Dal-chawal: Lentil soup and rice; a fuss-free meal

Dalal: Broker, tout

Darshan: A granted seeing

Dehati: Yokel, oik

Desi: Native

Devi: Goddess

Dhaba: Roadside eatery

Dhabeli: Pune snack, like vada pav

Dhadkan: Rhythm

Dhak: Large drum played by experts during Durga Puja

Dhakka-bukki: Push-and-shove

Dhoop: Incense

Dhobi-ka-kutta: One who doesn't belong; literally 'the  
446           washerwoman's dog'

Dikhaawa: Just for show

Dil: Heart

Dil Chahta Hai: The Heart Desires (film title)

Diya: Oil-lit flame bowls

'Dulhe ka sehra suhana lagta hai': (Broadly) 'The  
          bridegroom looks wonderful'

Duniya: World

Eve-teaser: An English term of Indian coinage to describe  
          a streetside Romeo who harasses women

Faltu: Useless

Gaali: Abuse

Gajar halwa: Dessert made of carrots and milk

Gajras: Fragrant flowers worn in the hair

Galli: Alleyway

Gaon: Village

Gandi: Dirty

‘Ganpatibappa, Morya’: ‘Hail to the Lord’

‘Garam garam kachori khaogi? Chutney chat patti ke  
saath?’: (Suggestive of) ‘Want something hot to eat?  
With some relish?’

Gareeb: Poor

Gareebi hatao: Banish poverty

Gayab: Lost

Ghagra: Long, flowing skirt

Ghasa-peeta: Rubbed and beaten

Ghee: Clarified butter

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Ghoda-gaadi: Horse-carriage

Ghungat: Veil

Gandhigiri: The adoption of the Mahatma’s principles

Gola: Ice lolly

Goonda: Thug

Goondagiri: Rule of thugs

Gora: Fair-skinned

Gori: Fair-skinned woman

Gotra: Clan

Gulab jamun: Sweetmeat in syrup

Gutka: Chewing tobacco

Haalat: Condition

‘Hari Om’: ‘Hail to God’

Hat ke se: A little offbeat

Hisaab-kitaab: Accounts book

‘Holi hai’: ‘It’s Holi’

‘Ho gaya hai’: ‘It’s happened’

‘Hum log bahut pyaare hai’: We are a caring, loveable lot

Idli-dosas: Rice-flour patties and crepes

IIT: Indian Institute of Technology (government centre of training admitting only the choicest students)

IIM: Indian Institute of Management (ditto)

Inshallah: Urdu for ‘God willing’

Izzat: Honour

‘Jaane do’: ‘Let it go’

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Jeera tadke: Tempered cumin seeds

Jhola: Cloth slingbag

Jholawallah: Someone who habitually carries a jhola, in an affectation of intellectualism

Jhopdi: Shanty

Jo jeeta woh Sikander: Literally, ‘He who wins is Alexander’;  
a close approximation to ‘To the victor go the spoils’

Josh: Energy, resolve

Jyotish: Astrologer

‘Kaaye? Hatt!’: ‘What? Go on!’

Kadwa Chauth: Fast observed to prolong the life of one’s husband

Kadhai: Wok

Kaajal: Antimony; kohl

Kakdi-tamater-pyaaz raita: Slender cucumber-tomato-onion in yogurt

Kali nazar: Evil eye

Karanji: Maharshtrian Diwali sweetmeat

Kashta: The drape of a nine-yard sari, which is worn like a dhoti, with the pleats going between the legs

Katori: Small bowl

Khadi: Handspun

Khakra: Gujarati snack, like dried chappati

Khatiya: Cot

Khuda hafiz: Urdu for 'God go with you'

Khilao paisa: Feed them money

'Ki pharak penda, madamji': 'What difference does it make, madam?

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Kirana: Corner store selling basic groceries

'Kiss-viss kiya ki nahin, yaar?': 'Did you do things like kiss?'

'Kitne khansame the?': 'How many cooks had they employed?'

'Krazy Kiya Re': 'You made me crazy' (film song)

Kuch bhi: Anything

Kuddi: Ornaments

Kulfi: A sort of ice cream

Kumkum: Red dye for anointing the forehead

Kursi: Chair, position

Kutta: Dog

'Kya ho gaya?': 'What's up?'

'Kya samajhta hai?': 'What does he take me for?'

Lachcha paratha: Flaky fried bread

Lagao maska: Lay on the flattery  
Laddoo: Sweets usually distributed in celebration  
Lalloo: Fool  
Lassi: A drink of whipped curd  
Lehenga: Voluminous bifurcated skirt  
Limbu pani: Lemonade  
Limbu-mirch: Lime and green chillies strung up to ward  
off ill luck  
Lota: Metal jug for toilet ablutions  
Love-shove: Love and all that (phonetic repetition to  
generalize or trivialize something)  
Lungi: Men's lower garment falling to the ankles

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Manoos: Man  
Mahaan: Great  
Maidan: Field  
Malai-kulfi: Rich ice cream  
Mandi: Market  
Mangta hai kya? Paisa ya pyaar?: Which do you desire?  
Money or love?  
'Mard toh mard hai': 'Men will be men'  
Mashallah: As God has willed (usually uttered in praise or  
thanksgiving for a blessing)  
Masti: Fun and abandonment  
Matka: Clay pitcher  
Matrubhasha: Mother tongue  
MC-BC: Mother-fucker, sister-fucker  
Maya: Ilusion  
Mehendi: Henna dye considered auspicious when applied



to the palms of new brides

Meher: Bride price

Mehman: Guest

Mera: Mine

Mera Bharat Jawan: My India is young

'Mera joota hai Japani ... yeh patloon Englishtani ... sar pe  
lal topi Russi, phir bhi dil hai Hindustani': A popular  
film song celebrating the belief that an Indian will  
remain at heart an Indian, no matter what influences  
he may absorb from other cultures

'Mera number kab aayega?': 'When will my number  
("turn") come?'

'Mere paas Ma hai': A melodramatic piece of dialogue that  
has become iconized in the Hindi film history, indicating  
that a mother is an individual's greatest strength

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Misthi doi: Yogurt sweetened with jaggery

Mithai: Sweetmeat

Mochi: Cobbler (by implication, of 'low caste')

Mulgi: Girl

'Munne ki Ma' or 'Bittu ki Ammi': In conservative India,  
women were often identified by the names of the sons  
they'd mothered.

Naan: Bread made of fermented dough

Naadaan: Helpless

Naara: Slogan

'Na ghar ka, na ghat ka': Belonging neither at home nor  
abroad

Namaste: Greeting

Nana: Mother's father  
Nanee: Mother's mother  
Nasha: Addiction, a state of intoxication  
Nazar na lag jaye: May you never be given the evil eye  
Neem: Tree with medicinal bark and leaves  
Neta: Political leader  
Netagiri: Politics  
Nikaah: Wedding in the Islamic tradition

452 Paan: Betel leaf  
Paisa vasool: Worth the expense  
Paisewalle log: People with money  
Pakwan: Flaky pastry  
Palak-paneer: Spinach and cottage cheese  
Panda: Temple priest  
Pandal: Marquee in which an idol is temporarily housed  
Paratha: Fried bread  
Papad: Poppadum  
Paratha: Fried bread  
Parivaar: Family  
Patshala: School  
Phoren: Foreign  
Phirang/Phirangi: Foreign, foreigner  
Pichkari: Long water-pistols used for squirting coloured liquids among Holi revellers  
Pohey: Savoury  
Pujari: Priest  
Purana: Old  
Puran poli: Maharashtrian-style dal-paratha sweetened with

*From Incredible to Unstoppable*

molasses

Pushpanjali: Worship with flowers

Pyaar: Love

Pyaar-vyaar: Love and stuff

Qawwali: Style of Muslim devotional music associated with  
Sufis

Raat gayee, baat gayee: Once the night passes, the matter is  
over

Rabdi: Creamy dessert

Raga: Improvised pattern of notes in classical music

Rajma: Kidney bean

Raita: Savoury curd

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Rangoli: Decorations drawn at entrances to homes on  
festive occasions

Rishi: Sage

Rivaaz: Custom

Roti, kapda aur makaan: Bread, clothes and a house; basic  
essentials

Saab: Sahib

‘Sab chalega’: ‘Everything will do’

‘Sab cheez badal gayi hai’: ‘Everything’s changed’

Sabjantawallah: Know-all

‘Sab kuch chalta hai—dacaity, atyachaar, ghoos, katal,  
brasthachar’: ‘Everything goes on—dacoity, assault,  
bribery, murder, rape’

Sambar: Lentil soup

Samskara: Custom, tradition

Sangam: Confluence, meeting

Sangeet: Pre-wedding ceremony in which the bride's friends sing in chorus

Sarkari: Governmental

Sat Sri Akal: Sikh greeting

Satta: Gambling

Sauchalaya: Lavatory

SC/ST: Scheduled castes and tribes

Seth log: The rich

Setting kar do: Set it up

Sev: Sweet vermicelli

Shaadi: Wedding

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Shatoosh: Shawls made of the fine down of the chiru, or Tibetan antelope, now banned in commercial trade because of indiscriminate hunting down of this now endangered animal; literally 'pleasure of kings'

Shanti: Peace

Sherwani: Long, formal men's jacket

Shorshe-Maach: A typically Bengali preparation of fish in mustard sauce

Show-sha: Showy; ostentatious display

Shravan: The most auspicious month in the Hindu calendar during which fasts are kept

Shukriya ji: Thank you, respected one

'Simbly': A pronunciation of 'simply' commonly attributed to Indians from the south who use it to mean 'Just like that'

Sthaan: Place, region

Supari: Contract killer/killing

Takkar: Collision, hit

Talaq: Divorce among Muslims

Tamasha: Spectacle, to-do

Teekhaapan: Spice

Thaalipeeth: Savoury made of gramflour

Thali: Metal plate

Thandai: Sherbet, often laced with bhang

Thadaak: Onomatopoeic word to suggest something being struck forcefully

Tharra: Country liquor

‘Theek hai’: ‘That’s fine’

Tika: Caste mark/cosmetic mark on forehead

455

Vada pau: Vegetable patty with chilly powder

Wah: Bravo

‘Woh hota rehta hai’: That happens

Yaar: Buddy

Yatra: Journey

‘Ye dosti ... kabhi nahi bhulenge’: A sentimental line from a song in the box-office wonder *Sholay*, attesting to the unbreakable ties in a friendship

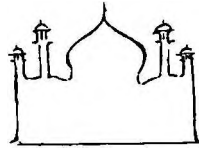
‘Yeh mera prem patra padkar, ki tum naraaz na hona...’: ‘Do not be angered by my love letter to you’ (film ditty)

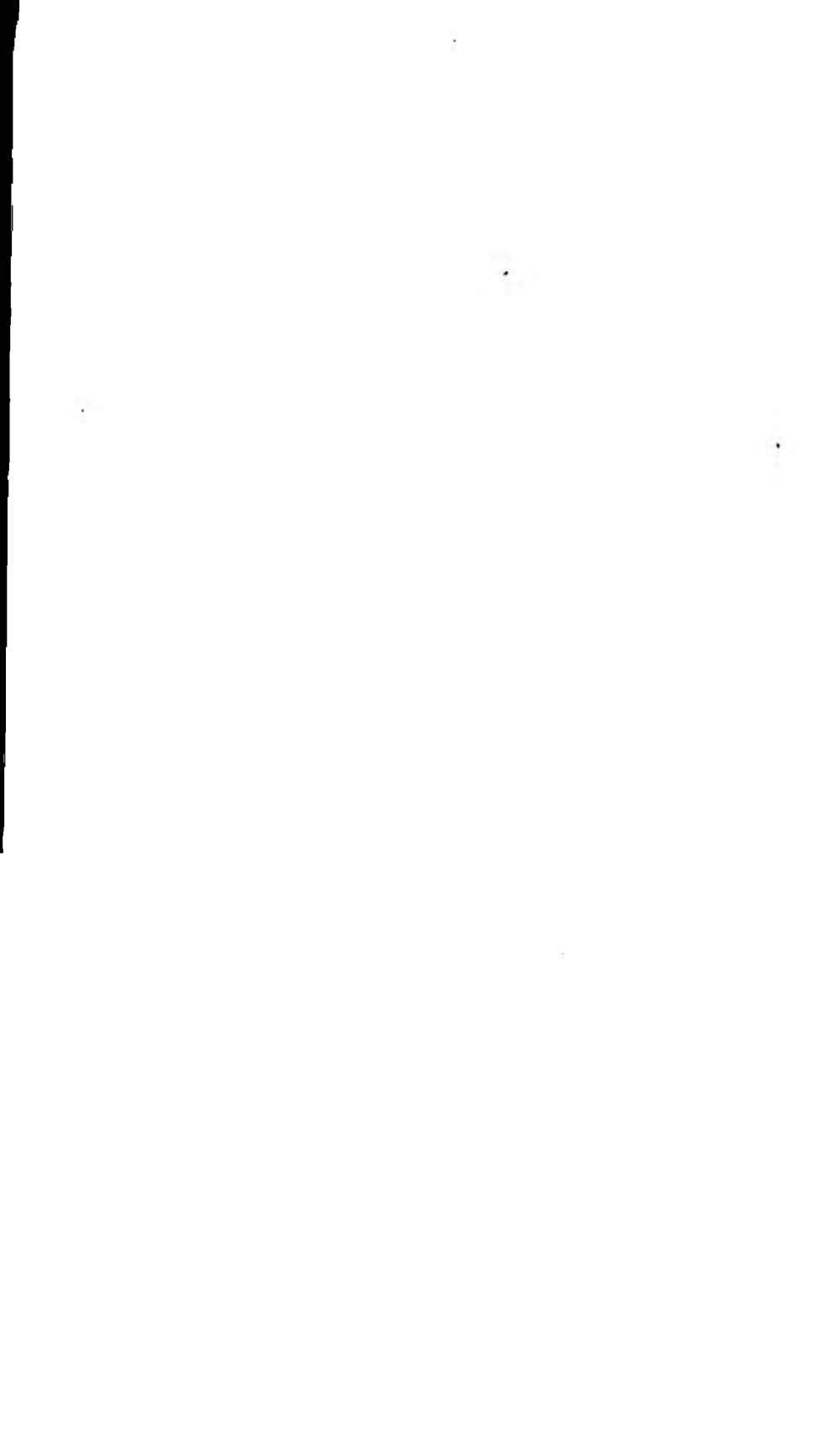
*Shobhaa De*

Zamindari: Landed gentry

Zari: Gold or silver embroidery

Zindabad: Long live





**'This is a story about India. My India. It is a very personal story.'**

It all began when, viewing the breathless preparations for independent India's 60th birthday celebrations—and poised then on her own sixth decade—Shobhaa Dé was struck by the thought: 'Surely my life has taken the same trajectory as the country's?' In an intimate confession to her readers, she answers that question, and many more: Does India really deserve to congratulate itself? Has it lived up to the early promises it made to its people? Does the author believe in India herself?

Surveying the many images of the country, Dé points out that for every truism about India the opposite is also true: India as the land of the meek; India as inheritor of the earth; India *gherao*-ed by distinctly unfriendly neighbours; Indians fleeing to jobs in the West and then racing right back to a better life; Indians who ape their erstwhile colonizers and yet cling irrationally to tradition.

In a departure from anything else she has written, Shobhaa Dé lasers in on Indian people and their place in the larger human society, pointing out her country's historical failings and equally historical glories. Admitting to our knee-jerk reactions to much of what is happening at home and in the world, Dé reasons, nevertheless, that the nation has earned superstar status, and with humorous argumentativeness, she convinces the reader that India is not about to lose its glow.

Cover photograph by Gautam Rajadhyaksha  
Cover design by Nitesh Mohanty

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