

Degrees of Separation: India Then and Now

Eighteen years ago in the year 1993, almost to the day, I departed India after a first, whirlwind voyage that took me from the "golden triangle" of Rajasthan to the temples of Tamil Nadu. I left behind clunky Ambassador cars in either black or ivory color, auto rickshaws spewing noxious fumes, telephone calls from public STD booths and flights on Indian Airlines. Vivid in memory are images of the sheer masses of humanity winding their way through streets. Buses were packed to bursting capacity and crammed trains wormed their way out of cavernous stations. While the employed were headed to offices and factories or sat in traditional shops displaying their wares, equally memorable images come back to me: the sheer number of people apparently living on sidewalks or in nooks and crannies of buildings. Small children with hair matted down, wearing hardly more than a rag. Entire families huddled together sleeping on the pavement with traffic roaring by inches away. Cobblers plying their trade on the street; sellers of odds and ends or meager produce - a few limes, a few eggs, - ; holes in the wall with a person selling cigarettes one at a time. Cows roaming freely, in more rural areas even pigs, and everywhere scruffy dogs trying to snatch anything eatable in the piles of smelly garbage left to its fate.

Since then, I have been back countless times, have married a native of Bengaluru, and like skins of onion am peeling away at the complexity that is India. In barely two decades, an entirely new India has emerged, accelerating at ever-faster speed of change. I don't know who first coined it, but the media has named it "India Inc.," Quite telling, seems to me, referring to a country as a corporation. A bit like calling your employees the "talent pool". One degree of separation but what a difference, indeed. It is clever, this India Inc. handle, leaving little doubt about the prevailing mindset. Trying to feel my way into its meaning, I get a sense of a split, a division. The 'old' India is there, massively, with its ancient culture and traditions. Simultaneously, an ambitious model is being devised and is presenting itself to the world at large; a different world, mind you, than the time-worn image of India as a largely poor, overpopulated "Third World" country. India Inc. is a country of ambitious entrepreneurs, of people and companies with aspirations no longer resigned to operate within their own borders. Global reach is exemplified by corporate takeovers, international travel and the increasing number of imported goods as well as lifestyles. Out went numerous city names foisted upon it by colonial rule. It has taken me a couple of years but is finally sounding familiar: Bombay is Mumbai, Madras is Chennai and Bangalore (a brand name, almost) is now Bengaluru in a decisive rotation away from involuntary baptism and toward an embrace of Indian-ness. Seldom is the old exclamation of "What to do?" to be heard, though it used to be an oft-repeated daily mantra of frustration. An entirely new level of self esteem has been born. Though in its infancy - this new awareness of Can-Do rather than the resigned What-To-Do, - it is quickly becoming a norm, especially in the metros. Aptly in keeping with the "Inc.," the primary drivers of growth are the cities referred to as "Tier One" cities (Mumbai, Delhi, Bangalore, Hyderabad, Chennai), followed by Tier Two and Three, with Four and Five as runners-up.

When I describe India Inc. to relatives in my native Germany I cannot help but use comparisons with the time the Wall came down and Berlin became a gigantic building site. The sheer magnitude of construction activity here, with all its derivative trickle-down needs, is both mind-boggling and historic to witness. Block after block, old buildings are torn down to give way to new, or are being renovated and given new use. Entire new townships spring up in a few years' time. The circumference of city limits is not merely expanding as a person would on a Bengal sweets diet, it is exploding in size. Big is getting bigger, with all accompanying growing pains. Established residential neighborhoods turn into commercial arteries of shops and offices, while many thousands of apartments are being built and manicured enclaves of villas are nestled behind compound walls. The skylines of cities are transforming into smart steel-and-glass high-rises. Not content to be a mere "5-star", 7-star hotels and swanky shopping malls dot downtowns. Sidewalks may still be dangerous to the health of pedestrians, but efforts are underway to improve roads, built where none have been in the past. Cars are no longer either black or ivory Ambassadors, but are any make, model and color manufactured in India and abroad. I am waiting for the day when an Indian car manufacturer picks up the remains of a

General Motors on the cheap (worn into oblivion under the Western model) and turns it into a manufacturer with astounding sales. Highways, where constructed, offer a speedier commute, albeit at the cost of nerves: speeding automobiles compete with the odd meandering farm vehicle, bus, motorbike, truck and often bicycle. Might clearly be Right here; the bigger the vehicle, the more it can disregard smaller or slower ones. To the driver used to rules, the more "intuitive" driving skills required on Indian roads is a scary proposition. - Several large scale metro-commuter systems are already functional or will be soon. New airports put to shame cramped and dated ones in many other parts of the world. A mobile phone is nearly in every pocket.

The scenes described above are leading back to my theme of degrees of separation: Aspiring, ambitious boom town India Inc. versus an India faithful to the spirit of another paradigm. Something is leaving me slightly uneasy here. It is not a personal hankering for a romanticized era that never existed anyway, or any sort of envy of the West. It is more a feeling that something is happening too rapidly, is too much on the shallow surface of things and is too over the top to be healthy. Good things take time is the old saying, and what India Inc. is achieving is coming at some expense. The expense (in my opinion) is the increasing dichotomy that greets everyone on a daily basis. More than ever, with accelerated change on many levels, the differences between the haves and have-nots are a matter of greater obviousness than in the past. While I am being reminded that disparities have always been part of life here, they are ever more apparent now. The slim but expanding percentage of educated citizens at the upper income level is able to live a vastly more comfortable and jazzy life style than in the past. The media, especially television, is sending the message of "if you have it, flaunt it", a 180 degree turn from the old credo of being low-key and guarded if you were well-to-do. You don't want to tempt the evil eye! At the upper level, an entire generation of people under 35 are fully buying into all the outer vestiges of a new Golden Age, being bombarded with the messages of advertisers to aspire to be consumers of all the goods and services, and to avail of all possible credit for instant gratification. While the energy and can-do-attitude implied is a net positive, it is characteristic of a young generation witnessing expansive good times, as yet without serious hiccup. Experience and age tends to be more cautious. Older folks might like to tap the young on the shoulder now and then, reminding them to reflect, be thoughtful, to weigh the benefits of their actions, or the lack thereof. They know trees do not grow to the sky, and straight line expansion will revert to the mean.

At the lower level of society, hundreds of millions of people under 35 are living from day to day, hand to mouth. Agricultural, rural India is a developmental light years away from boom town metros, but from there they flock in search of labor. Looking at the scene through Western eyes, one can easily see the contrast: the chauffeurs wiping down the cars (they walked to work), the gardeners watering lawns (they likely have no running water where they live), the servant maids arriving to do the cooking and cleaning (their diets and homes are vastly different in standard from the ones they work in). Often I wonder if they are really seen or heard, while they see and hear everything. No doubt they are in the majority. They still buy a cigarette one at a time, sell their meager inventory on the sidewalk and way too many still sleep on the street or in conditions intolerable even in thought. Cows (and in many parts of the country, pigs) still roam streets, forming a four-legged garbage collection brigade. Cobblers still mend shoes on the pavement, half naked children still beg. Air India still flies the skies on a wing and a prayer, though with fierce competition. Stray dogs have grown in size, clearly a sign of better garbage to feed on.

While India Inc.'s boom has indeed brought a trickle-down effect to many, it is only the beginning of a historic experiment. There is an acknowledged imperative for rapid further inclusion of this immense group in dire need of earning a living. Personally, I am unable to reconcile my ambivalence at the rapid speed of change toward consumerism with the equally rapid need to keep growing. But is being questioned what following blindly down the trodden path of consumerism will do? Is there enough abundance to go around or is everything a zero-sum game; one wins, the other loses? Is it a choice between lesser evils? Could there be a third paradigm, any alternative, for a country as populated as India, since the pitfalls of both Western consumer-lead growth as well as communism have become apparent? Oh to be able to look back at the future and know which was the better option! It is a formidable task facing India Inc.'s

leaders: to bring skills and education to this vast number of young citizens. A recent report estimates that 50 million young people will need training over the next decade to be able to live fruitful and productive lives, while providing an employable workforce to industry. For the sake of long-term stability of society at large, I hope and wish that these and the many hundreds of million more will find opportunity and overall hope to live a life of dignity, where hunger is not a worry or an unexpected small expense is not an existential threat. Mr. Ramadorai, the newly appointed advisor on skills development to Prime Minister Singh surely has his work cut out for him. I wish him the best of success.

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