

A Million Reformers

Every man is a reformer until the reforms tramp on his door.

—EDGAR HOWE

We are all susceptible to easy abstractions about uneasy facts around us. We tend to simplify and try to fit into comfortable categories of the mind the dissonant things that we observe in our day-to-day lives. In our laziness, we settle for the easy rhetoric of the newspapers, and the treachery of words like “reforms” and “new middle class.” It is even more difficult in India, where as we change and go forward, we cannot easily give up the past. As we take a few steps forward, we also take a step backwards, and the past is always with us. In this chapter I have tried to make some general observations about the changing India from stray street encounters over the past five years. This is always dangerous, for one tends to select facts that fit in with one’s prejudices and predispositions. However, the weight of anecdotal evidence seems to point in a clear direction. My meetings with Raju, Sushila, Golam Mandal, and Madhu Verma were not exceptional. My skeptical wife has also come around. I could narrate a dozen more stories, but the weight of my evidence suggests that India has changed since 1991. It may have something to do with the reforms; it may also have to do with television. But I have found a new mind-set, and I believe it will increasingly determine India’s identity and future.

On the last day of 1994, I took “early retirement” from the Procter & Gamble company. At the time I was based in Cincinnati as vice president and managing director of worldwide strategic planning, and I was attempting to “reinvent” the global Vicks business. It was a challenging and absorbing assignment, but I was finding the transition from the excitement and tension of running a day-to-day business to corporate strategy a difficult one. After virtually running my own company for a dozen years, I had found the headquarters bureaucracy oppressive. After almost thirty years, I was tired of the corporate world. For some time I had begun to feel confined. I also wanted to do a great deal more with my life. I thought Cincinnati provincial. I missed India and I wanted to be closer to the great changes taking place at home, and, if possible, influence them.

Possibly, it was also the tug of the old Hindu idea of the four stages of life pulling at me from the collective unconscious. The first stage, called *brahmacharya*, is the life of a student or a celibate. The second stage, *grihasta*, literally householder, is a life of worldly pleasure, when one marries, has a family, and discharges one’s responsibilities to society. All manner of sensual pleasures are sanctioned at this stage, including courtesans, I once reminded my dismayed wife. At the third stage, called *vanaprastha*, when the children are settled and debts repaid, one is expected to start detaching oneself from the rough-and-tumble of worldly affairs and begin the quest for the meaning of life. The fourth stage is called *sanyas* or renunciation, when one abandons society and its comforts to single-

mindedly seek unity with the Absolute.

My wife said, “Are you sure about what you are doing? I mean, we are earning a lot of money. Anyone else would have thought that this is the time to harvest all those years of hard work and to enjoy the fruits of power and money.” Of course, she was right. It was not easy to give up the largesse of the corporate life. We went through a struggle.

“But I want to do other things,” I protested. “I mean, don’t we have enough money? At this point of my life, I don’t want to jet around the world for fifteen days in a month. I want to write. The important thing is to agree that our wants are limited. After that it’s straight arithmetic.”

She understood. She reminded me, in fact, that many years ago I had told her that I wanted to quit the corporate world at fifty. We sat down and calculated how much we would need to live on for the rest of our lives, including the cost of supporting our children, who fortunately were grown up and were finishing college. Against our needs, we tried to match the likely income we would earn from our savings and investments. It turned out that we might just be able to make it.

Having decided to quit, we wrote to a number of friends in India. My own company was extremely gracious. It suggested a number of alternative jobs where I might be happier, but when John Pepper, the CEO, realized that my mind was made up, he offered me early retirement with its attendant benefits. The *Times of India* offered to let me write a regular column. Since I had been writing for the paper off and on for many years, this was not a complete surprise, and I immediately accepted. Manmohan Singh, the finance minister, wrote back to say, “Come back. Can’t promise you anything, but we shall try.” Several Indian groups invited me to run their companies, but I declined. My tax consultant at Deloitte advised me to return my green card; otherwise, I would have to pay heavy and unnecessary taxes to the U.S. government on my non-U.S. income. He added that I must remember to obtain Form I-407 when I returned my green card.

A few days later I went to the immigration office in Cincinnati. As I was returning my green card, the immigration officer asked, “Sir, what’s the problem? Don’t you like our country?” I told him I liked his country, but not its tax laws. When I asked him for Form 407, he looked puzzled. “Never seen it,” he said. He called Washington, and they faxed him the form, which was titled “Wilful Abandonment of Lawful Permanent Residence Status.”

“Hold your horses, young man! I gotta ask you some questions,” he said. The questions had to do with making sure that I was leaving voluntarily—that I was not being forced out of the country for any reason. I left the office, impressed with the U.S. government’s concern for human rights.

On returning to India we decided to settle in Delhi rather than Bombay. It made sense for me to settle there because, in my new career as a writer, I needed to be near libraries, editors, intellectuals, and think tanks. Delhi has plenty of these, unlike Bombay, which is primarily a commercial city. If one is not making business deals, I felt, there is no fun in living in Bombay. However, my wife hated Delhi. She said it had no soul, and that its street life was aggressive.

They say that the measure of a civilization is how it treats its women. Since coming to Delhi I have met many women who long for Bombay. My wife explains that Bombay gives women dignity. If Bombay respects women, Delhi looks on them as sex objects. In Bombay, she can take a taxi at midnight; in Delhi, a girl cannot walk freely on the street in the evening. It seems that it takes more

than education to bring civilization.

Bombay has this civilizing quality, I think, because of its origins as a city of commerce. Montesquieu wrote in his *Spirit of the Laws* that “it is almost a general rule that wherever manners are gentle, there is commerce; and wherever there is commerce, manners are gentle.” He felt that commerce diverted people away from brutal wars and bloodshed. A few years later, Samuel Richard added that “commerce makes him who was so proud and haughty, suddenly turn supple, bending and serviceable. Through commerce, man learns to deliberate, to be honest, to acquire manners, to be prudent and reserved in talk and action.” Commerce, they say, encourages the bourgeois virtues of thrift, hard work, self-reliance, and self-discipline. My experience of businessmen—Marwaris, Jains, and Gujarati banias—is that they possess these qualities in abundance, particularly the virtue of restraint.

The first rule of business is that unless both the buyer and seller are happy, the business transaction is not stable. If the buyer drives too hard a bargain or if the seller’s goods are less than promised, the transaction fails. Thus, businesspeople learn interdependence. Both the buyer and the seller have to be satisfied, and this promotes a positive-sum game. People in business also understand the importance of “growth.” They learn to believe that there is enough to go around, and this creates an “abundance mentality.”

The origins of Delhi are feudal and monarchical. Because of the hierarchical nature of bureaucratic society, Delhi regards life as a zero-sum game. The pyramid gets smaller as you move up. There can be only one Prime Minister. Not everyone can be secretary. If you have to win, someone has to lose. Instead of becoming interdependent as buyers and sellers, you learn to put people down. Transactions in Delhi—as in Washington, D.C.—depend on influence and patronage, and it matters less what you know than whom you know. Person for person, Delhi people are better fed, better clothed, and better off. It is a middle-class city with a higher per capita income. However, it is not a very pleasant city. The Delhi resident wears his bad manners on his shirtsleeves. Fortunately, Delhi has changed a great deal in the last decade; it has increasingly become a commercial city. New business have come in. Multinational companies have established their headquarters here. A new middle class has emerged. This is the best hope of civilizing the manners of Delhi. My wife despairs that it will not happen in her lifetime.

Soon after we returned to India in 1995 and people discovered that I had nothing better to do, they began to invite me to join their board of directors. At first, I was flattered by this attention, and I began to accept the invitations indiscriminately. Before I realized it, I was a member of fourteen boards and I was traveling twelve days in a month, hopping from one board meeting to the next. After three months of this, I discovered that this was a terrible way to live. Board governance is of vital importance, but given the way boards are structured there is little hope of penetrating a company as a nonexecutive board member. This means that there is little satisfaction in being a board member.

At the same time, I did want to stay in touch with developments in the business world. I also felt I could contribute something to the success of some of the companies. So one afternoon I picked up the phone and I spoke to fourteen board chairmen and I said, “Look, I am deeply honored to be on your board. But I have decided that I must restrict myself to a few companies, and these I can get to know

well and contribute to their success. If you think I can help your company, give me a challenging assignment. I shall give you one day a month and charge you a very high fee to ensure that both you and I take the assignment seriously. In this way, I shall be able to penetrate your business and be a more useful board member.”

To my surprise, six companies agreed to appoint me consultant. I stepped down from the other boards. I checked from a regulatory point of view whether a consultant could also be a board member. The answer was that if the company’s lawyer or chartered accountant could be a board member, so could a consultant. My consultancy took off and soon I was having a lot of fun working six days a month helping six companies to become competitive. I began to help one company build a global brand; another to regain market share in the domestic market; a third company to innovate and upgrade its product line; a fourth company to expand the market since it already had the leadership position; a fifth to transition from a family to a professionally run business; and a sixth to get its managers to work cohesively against preagreed objectives. I had a ringside view of Indian business.

My consultancy assignments took me to distant parts of the country. Occasionally I was able to get away from the big cities, where I would meet a different type of businessman. One such trip took me to Pondicherry. We set out in the morning from Madras, and after an hour stopped in a village cafe, where we were served the most wonderful south Indian coffee by fourteen-year-old Raju, who wanted to become another Bill Gates when he grew up (and whom we met in the introduction). Returning from Pondicherry, I came upon a stream of young girls, brightly dressed in sarees of different colors, walking in a single file along the two-lane highway. There were hundreds. My first reaction was that they must be going to a temple. It must be a festival day. What else could be happening, early in the morning, in the middle of nowhere? We stopped the car and asked one of the girls what was going on.

“Nothing,” she giggled. “We are walking to work at the leather factory.” She made leather shoes. I asked her about her customers.

“Florsheim, Hogarth, Marks and Spencer.” She said the names in a clear and deliberate manner. She was very proud of her customers. “Yes, we make very good shoes,” she added.

She told us that her name was Sushila. She was twenty years old, and she earned Rs 15,000 a month. She had been working in the factory since it started three years ago. Ever since then things had changed rapidly in her village, Guduvengeri. All the girls had jobs now. They could make their own dowries, and they got respect. I seem to find more job opportunities for women in the south than in the north. Probably it is because they are better educated. South India, for the most part, treats its women better than the less-educated north. Suddenly, Sushila dropped her bag and she became flustered. A small bottle of Oil of Olay spilled out. Fortunately, it didn’t break, and she was relieved.

“Isn’t it expensive?” I asked. It used to be very expensive, she said, but the price had come down. Her shopkeeper had told her that excise duties had come down on all cosmetics. Looking at her watch, she said abruptly, “I must go.” She ran off to join the colorful line to the factory. I had liked the way she had confidently rattled off “Florsheim, Hogarth.” She had said the names as though she really cared for her customers. She clearly knew the secret of success in the global economy.

Meeting Sushila brought back uncomfortable memories. On the crowded road back to Madras I

recalled my fruitless visits to Delhi's North Block. I had paced the corridors in the 1980s trying to persuade anyone who would listen in the finance ministry that a 120 percent excise duty on toiletries was counterproductive. I had felt frustrated that we could not introduce our shampoos—Pantene, Pert Plus, Head & Shoulders, and Vidal Sassoon—because the tax structure more than doubled their price. All the Asian subsidiaries of P&G had built successful hair care businesses except India. For the same reason, our Oil of Olay had also not grown. P&G China, in contrast, had built the second-largest Olay business in the world with half our consumer price.

My lowest point had come in a meeting with the finance minister. I had argued that lowering the excise duty would lower consumer prices of shampoos, skin creams, and other toiletries, which in turn would raise their demand. The tax revenues would thus rise, although the tax rate might be lower. Indian women did not need lipsticks and face creams, felt the minister. I replied that all women wanted to look pretty.

“A face cream won't do anything for an ugly face. These are luxuries of the rich,” he said. I protested that even a village girl used a paste of haldi so that she could look pretty.

“No, it's best to leave a face to nature,” he said impatiently.

“Sir,” I pleaded, “how can you decide what she wants? After all, it is her hard-earned money.”

“Yes, and I don't want her wasting it. Let her buy food. I don't want multinational companies getting rich selling face creams to poor Indians.”

I patiently explained to him that many more Indian companies would benefit from lowering their prices. In any case, whether Indian or foreign, there would be many more jobs for Indians as volumes grew—not only more jobs in the companies but in their suppliers and in the suppliers of their suppliers. These were the spread effects of investment. He stopped me, saying that he did not need a self-serving lesson in economics, and he motioned me out of his office.

Sushila had opened a wound that I thought had healed. It had happened ten years ago, but I could still get angry at the stupidity of the command economy and the arrogance of its commanders. As we hit the traffic on Mount Road, I calmed down. Raju and Sushila, I realized, were already a part of the global economy—Raju in his dreams of Bill Gates and Sushila in the way she thought about her customers. Manmohan Singh had not only halved the excise duty on toiletries, he had let loose a bigger revolution. Liberalization in trade, besides information technology, tax reform, and free access to the airwaves, was beginning to change Sushila's and Raju's minds.

On the flight back to Delhi, I met a friend, Nalini Singh, and I told her about Raju and Sushila. She told me in turn about a young girl in Connaught Place from whom she bought flowers for her hair. Recently, she said, she had pulled over at the traffic fight near Nirula's. As she was selecting a jasmine band, she had remarked to the girl that her *gajras* were remarkably cool and fresh. Their perfume had filled the evening air.

The girl pointed to a tiny refrigerator, which was partially visible in the corner grocery store. This was her secret. “Do you really keep your flowers in the fridge?!” Nalini exclaimed. Not in those words, but the girl explained that this is how she derived competitive advantage over the girl who stood at the Janpath traffic corner.

A few months later, my friend S. K. Singh invited me to his brother's farm in Uttar Pradesh.

“Bartoli is a sleepy village. There are mostly low-caste families, some Muslims and a sprinkling of Rajputs. They only talk of corruption and influence, *rishwat* and *sifarish*.” So said SK’s brother as we turned off the Grand Trunk Road between Bulandshahr and Khurja, a hundred kilometers east of Delhi.

I looked around the village and I saw another story. Fields were laden with sugarcane, tractors were plowing the land; tractor-trailers had created a traffic jam on the narrow bridge connecting the village to the main road; diesel pump sets were pumping out gallons of water; well-fed uniformed schoolchildren walked home from a new Montessori school that was only six months old but had already enrolled eighty students.

The schoolmaster at the old government school wanted to know when the government planned to start the new “midday meals” scheme. He had read in the newspaper that it was coming soon. It was hot inside my host’s simple village home, and we pulled out our charpai. My host explained to me that the only reason the schoolmaster expressed concern about the new “free lunch” program was that he expected to get a cut from the scheme.

Fateh Singh, a neighbor, came to greet us. He was a young fiery-eyed Dalit whose diffident manner hid an alert mind. He would not sit on the same charpai because my host was Rajput. Fateh Singh owned four acres and plowed another six on contract. The Dalits in the village had been “unclean” leather workers, but now they plowed the land with five tractors, which they rented to each other. “The problem is labor, sir. I can’t get anyone to work the land.” Krishan Pal Singh, a Rajput, who owned thirty acres between the two villages of Bartoli and Mamman Khurdua, joined the refrain. “Our biggest problem is getting someone to work in the fields. I pay Rs 45 a day plus three meals and free fodder for the cattle—and I still can’t get anyone.”

“It isn’t easy working the land,” said Fateh Singh. “We get power only at nights. So someone needs to stay awake to water the fields. In May and June it gets so hot that you are reminded of your grandmother.” This drew a laugh, but it explained why the young were leaving the village.

“What are you complaining about?” said my host provocatively to Fateh Singh. “Mayawati is now the chief minister. You can have anything you want.” Fateh Singh was hurt. He did not like to be reminded of his caste, even though the new chief minister was a Dalit too. “I am a liberal, and above these caste distinctions,” said my host, turning to me, “but I cannot tolerate the sight of a low-caste girl sitting beside a Brahmin boy. I saw it with my own eyes on a bus in Delhi the other day. Mind you, the boy was the son of a Supreme Court judge.”

“What is wrong with them sitting on the bus together?” I asked artlessly.

“What’s wrong—she is unclean!” said my Rajput host, rising imperiously from the charpai and assuming the dignity of a retired transport commissioner. “They used to carry muck on their heads.”

“That was probably two generations ago,” I said, impatience showing in my voice.

After a few months, my consultancy with a garment company took me on a field trip to Calcutta, where I visited the prosperous Sumangal Clothing Store on Lindsay Street. There I met Golam Mondal, a mustachioed salesman in his forties from Babnam village in Hooghly district. Mondal had spread out his chikon embroidery on two counters and he was trying to sell it wholesale to Sumangal.

“It is exquisite!” I exclaimed at a blouse. The store owner reminded me not to get too enthusiastic

since he was trying to beat down the price. Mondal explained that his cousin had spent three months to complete it along with a matching saree. Both were for Rs 5,000. I asked how much his cousin earned doing this work. He looked around to ensure that the store owner was not within hearing.

“Are you a customer, sir?”

“No,” I said.

“Then I can tell you—she earns plenty, sir. Our people prefer to work on piece rate. Simple chikon workers can earn Rs 350 for shadow work or reverse stitching. For kantha, our traditional Bengali needlework, they earn as much as Rs 1,000 per piece. We are a village of two hundred families, and the average family earns Rs 8,000 per month, which is a lot. The women do the embroidery and the men go out and sell the work. I concentrate on the south, and my order book is bursting this year. The Punjab National Bank has already upgraded our Babnam branch. The manager says that deposits from the chikon workers are more than Rs 1.5 crore.”

“Does the government help?” I asked.

“Help, sir? We don’t want the government near our village. I am ashamed to take you to our village, sir. In the rains our road gets washed away. The trucks carrying raw materials get stuck in the slush. We get half the power that we need. I don’t know how I am going to fulfill this order book, with the power situation being what it is.”

“What accounts for your order book?”

“I don’t know. Ten years ago, we were as poor as mice. Today nursing homes, schools, hotels—they all want our chikon work. Earlier, we depended on saree and handloom shops—” He stopped mid-sentence, seeing the store owner approach.

“Yes, you ungrateful wretch. I know, you are a big man now.”

In the evening, I went to meet some old friends in Calcutta. They complained that there were no jobs for the young in Calcutta. I told them about Mondal. But they couldn’t relate to his life. I felt sorry for middle-class Bengali mothers whose educated sons either were unemployed or had left for other parts of India to look for a job. “Despite the hype, no sensible industrialist will invest in a communist state,” said Bandopadhyaya. “Ironical, isn’t it, we finally have good infrastructure—power, telecom, the metro—but no jobs.” It was different in the countryside, they said. People were more positive. Many had benefited from land reforms. “The green revolution has finally come to Bengal,” said Bandopadhyaya.

The following month I happened to be in Rajasthan, in the pink city of Jaipur, in the company of an American visitor. While he went to see the tourist sights, I decided to visit Madhu Verma, whom I had first met in Bombay but had not seen for a dozen years. Her husband was the manager of a public-sector bank. They had lived in Jaipur for the past fifteen years. On the way to their home, I was caught in a traffic jam. I fretted that I would be late.

Jaipur seemed to have shed its sleepy, apologetic, small-town air. I felt a new aggressiveness on the streets. People who earlier walked were on bicycles; those who rode bicycles were now on scooters; those on scooters were now riding shining new Maruti cars and causing this traffic jam. Jaipur was also filthier. Fifteen years ago, the same street had been a clean, wide boulevard. Today, garbage was piled on both sides of the road and vied belligerently with the fumes of the traffic. It was

hot in the taxi, and the exhaust and the din of the traffic was relentless. The afternoon sun was burning hot and my shirt began to stick to my skin.

Finally, the traffic came unstuck, and we turned into a newly built colony of Jaipur's upwardly mobile middle class. We passed garishly painted houses, in bright pink and green, with satellite dishes on the roof, cars parked outside, and open garbage mounds at the back. Soon I arrived at Madhu Verma's house. I guessed that it must be hers—it was quiet, surrounded by bougainvillea flowers, a nicely cut lawn, and lots of greenery. Inside it was cool and I was surrounded by old-world charm.

“Jaipur has changed,” Madhu said in a pleasant way—soothing like a dentist promising not to injure. “It is such a quiet change that no one notices it. Much of it I don't like, but there are good things too.” She served me tea and asked me about my parents. I asked what had changed.

She looked out at the kachnar tree outside the window as though to help her think. “I have four children, and all of them are working. The two younger ones have got jobs on their own without any connections. And my older girl has recently changed her job for a better one. My fourth has started a business. He is not doing too well right now because there's too much competition in his line. He doesn't want to work for anyone.”

“What is changed?” I asked again.

“That's the change. My kids have jobs, careers. There's excitement in the house. They bring news of the world. Do you think ten years ago they'd have got settled on their own? There would have been panic. I would have been phoning the whole world to find out if someone knew someone in the UPSC [Union Public Services Commission]. Mind you, they are not alone. Their friends from college have also landed good jobs or are thinking about starting businesses.”

“What do you think is responsible for this?”

“I don't know. I am no expert. Maybe it's the economic reforms. I just know that my kids in Jaipur have got jobs, and my cousin's kids in the UK haven't. And they have been looking for two years.”

Even the judiciary and the trade unions have been infected by the changing attitudes. “Justice Sawant of the Bombay High Court now delivers five out of ten judgments in favor of business; earlier, ten out of ten judgments were in labor's favor,” Zia Mody, a young, high-powered lawyer, tells me in Bombay. A. Francis, the general secretary of the communist trade union, AITUC, confesses that unions had put off the middle class because “we blindly supported the public sector [even when] it had failed to provide efficient services.” Labor attitudes have mellowed. There are fewer strikes and labor agreements now routinely include productivity clauses. Francis is a new kind of labor leader. He sits before a computer in his Delhi office, wears a fashionable striped shirt, tinted aviator spectacles, smart loafers, and smokes Wills. He studied at the Delhi School of Economics and became a communist during the student movement in 1972–73. Francis says that closing a public-sector company should not be viewed from the point of view of job losses alone. If it releases resources and makes fresh investments possible elsewhere, then it makes sense.

The debate in the country seems to be shifting from politics to economics. The circulation of the leading business daily, the *Economic Times*, was less than 100,000 copies in 1989. In March 1994, it touched 500,000 copies, making it 60 percent larger than the United Kingdom's *Financial Times*. It

subsequently came down to 380,000 with the decline in the stock market. Similarly, the readership of the three leading business magazines has doubled over the past five years. During the summer of 1995, the entire country was mesmerized by the American energy company Enron's power plant in Maharashtra. In Parliament, in the newspapers, on glamorous TV chat shows, Indians discussed the intricacies of Enron's power purchase agreement with the same avidness as they discussed the cricket genius Tendulkar's batting average. Students in Maharashtrian colleges mentioned Enron's plant load factor with casual sophistication, as though they were talking about the latest affair of their favorite hero on the Bombay screen.

Even the politicians have changed. I visited a former cabinet minister at his home in Delhi. He lived in an old imperial bungalow with neoclassical columns on one of the wide avenues in Sir Edwin Lutyens's Delhi, surrounded by a magnificent lawn and guards at the gate. There were no suppliants, however. Then I remembered that the great man was no longer in power. In the old days, there were always dozens of people waiting outside his door. The dignity of a great man was judged in those days of the License Raj by the number of people waiting to see him.

The great man walked in punctually at five, fresh after a bath, in a starched kurta. Five minutes later an impeccably dressed attendant brought us tea.

"You don't come and visit us anymore," he said with a gentle smile which covered the mild rebuke. "But then no one comes to visit politicians these days."

I looked around the comfortably appointed room. I realized that this house would have to be soon given up. If he still had clout, he would find ways to keep it. But it must rankle to be illegally occupying a government house. He must have caught the drift of my thought. "Yes, everything in this house belongs to the government: every cup, every saucer, this tea tray, the attendant and even this uniform." His helpless look seemed to say, "How can a man give up all this and become a nothing?"

He offered me a cup of tea and said, "I am glad you have offered to help the government with the reforms. We need to globalize our economy and to make our businesses more competitive." He talked for half an hour in this way, saying all the right things. As he warmed up, I could see the politician in action. It was a well-rehearsed performance. I was amused to see an amazing turnaround by this great advocate of socialism. Five years ago, he had lectured to me in the same way, but he had said exactly the opposite.

As I was leaving, he lowered his voice. "Yes, by all means, go and help the government in its liberalization program, but remember us as well. Don't forget the old friendships. It is sad that businessmen don't come to see us now." He looked to me for a response, and then he said to no one in particular, "Can't we have reforms and still keep the old contacts flowing?"

The veranda with the round old pillars was dulled by the evening sunlight. The cane chairs, which had earlier looked restful, suddenly seemed ugly and heavy in the bleached light. The rotted chick blinds added to the dull, official feeling of the house. For a few minutes I had almost believed that the great man had genuinely changed and that he spoke sincerely for the reforms, so good had been his performance. In the end, the dirty truth had come out, staining an otherwise fine evening.

I wondered if corruption had come down or had it increased since the reforms, as many said.

"Corruption may have grown in the areas where the reforms are half complete, such as power,

telecom, aviation, environment,” says Swaminathan Aiyar, “But there is also more *talk* of corruption because of an activist judiciary and a sensationalist press. It has certainly not increased because of the reforms.”

Of this I am clear—the minds of the people have begun to change. It has happened more in the middle class; it is more apparent in the young; it is more obvious in the business world. People have begun to look at the world differently. There is a quiet confidence in the air. People genuinely believe that their children will be better off than they were. Young managers and entrepreneurs exhibit a “can-do” attitude. Nor is it only on account of the reforms. The middle class is growing rapidly. Television is freeing the mind. However, the single biggest factor in opening the floodgates seems to be the liberalization of 1991. Becoming rich has also become acceptable. Whereas a government job was the route to success in the previous generation, now the thing to do is to go into business. Money has replaced power and privilege. Older, traditional people are quick to condemn the changing attitudes. They call it “greed.” They are upset and see it as a threat to Indian culture. But the younger people defend themselves, saying that it is not greed but a desire for achievement. They want to “get things done,” to “produce results,” and business offers to them a stage to do so.

Business people are the most prophetic when speaking of the reforms. “Narasimha Rao came out of Jurassic Park in 1991 to become the biggest revolutionary in India since Gautama Buddha,” says Aveek Sarkar, the Calcutta publisher, with a mischievous smile. “But he doesn’t realize it!” Anil Ambani of Reliance says, “It is not economic reform, it is a revolution!” Others have also expressed similar sentiments. Sharad Joshi, the leader of half a million farmers in Maharashtra, told me, “It is our second independence. In 1947 we only got our political independence; we struggled for another forty-four years before we finally won our economic independence in 1991.” Arun Shourie, the author and commentator, says, “Today we have the same sense of possibilities that existed in the early fifties.”

“How else do you explain the sight of eighty-two-year-old Jyoti Basu, the communist lord of Bengal, standing before an audience of Wall Street investors trying to drum up investment for his state?” says Aveek Sarkar. “How did you do it?” exclaims a German businessman on an Indian Airlines flight to Calcutta. “It is going to take us a whole generation to assimilate East and West Germany, yet in a few short years you have succeeded in changing attitudes.”

India is no longer the stable land of certainties. There is new energy, a new sense of freedom. Listening to Golam Mandal of Babnam village, I realized that the state was no longer the protector “mother-father” to many people. Suspicion of the state was a part of the new mind-set. Instead of viewing the end of old reverences as a cynical condemnation of a corrupt government, I see it as the sign of a new maturity in our democratic journey. Had not the liberal philosophers always expressed a suspicion of state power? The American founding fathers had gone to a great deal of trouble to create a system of checks and balances on the different agencies of the state. Whether the change is due to an activist judiciary, or a powerful election commissioner, or the impact of television, or the Mandal social revolution, or economic liberalization, it is hard to be sure. When the former finance minister, Manmohan Singh, announced the economic reforms in July 1991, I thought it was about technical matters like “structural adjustment,” “tariff levels,” “industrial delicensing.” I now realize

that the reforms are creating a revolution in ideas and changing the attitudes of the people. Raju, Sushila, Kum Kum, define a new image of India. I encounter it frequently—in the hopes of the young, in the way people talk, in the way mothers think about their daughters. It is a new way of looking at the world. A revolution in ideas does not of course mean that jobs are immediately sprouting or that poverty is disappearing. Heartbreaking poverty is still the pervasive face of India. It is a terrible prison in which far too many Indians live in fearful anxiety. However, one day, and sooner than we perhaps expect, the mental revolution should lead to a physical one.