



Rupa Gulab

Brief aus Mumbai

Living the good life in booming India, one can almost forget social inequality, the Pakistan conflict, and religious fundamentalism, writes Rupa Gulab.

Well, what do you know! The world is now saying the most encouraging things about India. I have to confess that it certainly feels good to be recognised as an economic superpower, especially after years of being pitied as a panhandling Third World country with a socialist game plan. You remember those old commercials of Levis jeans being smuggled into the erstwhile Soviet Union? We were almost as pathetically deprived as that too, before liberalisation changed our lives forever. Now we don't have to beg family and friends travelling abroad to get us any brand of jeans that Oprah enthusiastically approves of on her terribly erudite show, or those wonderful, wonderful push-up bras (how *did* we ever get husbands without them?). Or even recycle Coke cans as pen stands to make our neighbours feel woefully inadequate (we ruthlessly crush them and throw them away disdainfully these days). We can even buy your scrumptious chocolates and cheeses from our friendly neighbourhood grocery stores! This, of course, has turned our traditional relaxing Yoga classes on their heads: a new alarmingly energetic form of Power Yoga has evolved, mainly, I think, because those colas, chocolates, and cheeses are so loaded with added ingredients.

On a more serious note, as a Westerner, you probably have no idea how wonderful it feels to say, "Thank you so much for your offer but we can manage on our own, really", to financial aid institutions we used to bow down to. It feels even better when we provide aid to less fortunate countries in their hours of need. But (and I say this with a deep sigh), I wish we could offer more aid to our own people, many of whom still do not enjoy the benefits of India's economic growth. Practically every day, new international high-end luxury brands are launched in India and we see our upwardly mobile people flaunting them triumphantly even when walking the dog (this has led me to the startling discovery that Christian Dior just doesn't go well with pooper-scoopers). One of the directors of Louis Vuitton was in Mumbai recently to launch their watches range, and he predicted that, "In the next decade, India will be one of our biggest markets." The rich-poor divide has deepened and my inner socialist tells me that all this conspicuous consumption may well lead to a callous "Let them eat cake" attitude among the haves, and we all know how tragically that story ended. Sadly, even conscience-stricken people who contribute generously to charitable causes, even if there's no glitzy celebrity buffet thrown in, will meet the same fate. Face it, there's no time to fish out "Thank you for your donation" receipts from organisations like UNICEF as proof of your caring-sharing nature when an angry, less-privileged mob is

baying for your blood. So you see, I'm not totally euphoric about India's shiny new status yet. I will pop the champagne when we're all doing reasonably well. And I do hope it happens in my lifetime because it's a rather nice bottle of champagne, a Dom Perignon, to be precise. Do excuse the name-dropping, I'm not an insufferable show off. This is just to let you know how deep the divide really is. The rest of us can barely afford to splurge on fizzy soft drinks.

By the way, did you read about the recent terrorist attack on the *Samjhauta Express*, a train that runs between India and Pakistan? With boring predictability, this happened just a few days before peace talks were scheduled. Tsk, terrorists have no imagination at all, makes you realise how much better Montessori schools are, compared to *madarassas*. Anyway, this train service was supposed to be one of the many confidence-building measures between our two countries (hollow, cynical laugh). I wish I were more confident about Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf's commitment to the war against terror. As a matter of fact, I wish I were more confident of President Bush's ability to persuade President Musharraf to crush the merry band of terrorists that lurk around in this part of the world. President Bush's occasional finger-wagging and frequent blank cheques with his thumb impression don't seem to be working. But then, on the other hand, Bush's invasion of Iraq doesn't seem to be working either. Oh my God, I've finally, finally got it: maybe, just maybe, the problem is that Bush is not working? *Quod erat demonstrandum?*

Roger Waters certainly seems to think so. He was in Mumbai last week, on a *Dark Side of the Moon* concert, and he certainly wasn't "shorter of breath", though he did look "one day closer to death" as the song goes. As did more than 70 per cent of the crowd, die-hard Pink Floyd fans whose excitement was so frenzied, I was certain they'd be leaving the concert grounds in ambulances. Yes, I confess that I was one of the shamefully middle-aged fans. It goes without saying that Waters put up an adrenaline-charged performance and brought the house down when the legendary graffiti-inscribed pig balloon was released in the air. The buzz grew into a deafening roar when the airborne pig bobbed, turned, and revealed "Impeach Bush" scribbled on its rear. Now that's what you call great positioning. And it was certainly more inspiring than an effigy.

What do you think of Bollywood B-list star Shilpa Shetty becoming the UK's sweetheart after her stint on *Big Brother*? I just cannot believe that she's been hyped so much by the British media that people are starting to see her as a cross between Mahatma Gandhi, Dr Martin Luther King Jr, and Nelson Mandela. At the same time, of course, I'm happy for her, everyone deserves their Warholian 15 minutes of fame, but it's got me wondering about a few things. Isn't it odd that a nonsensical reality show actually proved to be a catalyst in exposing a social evil? Imagine, it does have its uses, after all! Now if only our call-centre employees who have to bite their tongues in response to rude remarks from British callers were also lauded for their dignified forbearance in the same manner as Saint Shilpa. Yes, maybe they can't pronounce words like Worcestershire and Gloucestershire correctly, but tell me honestly, how many people can, unless they are spelt phonetically? Don't they also deserve to be invited to tea by Tony Blair and the Queen, at the very least? Perhaps all call centres run by Indians should replace their on-hold tunes (usually something cheerfully frivolous like *Santa Claus is coming to town*, played even during Lent) with Shylock's dark anti-racism speech in *The Merchant of Venice*: "If you prick us, do we not bleed?"

Which brings me to the sad reminder that we Indians have a discriminatory past too in our ancient caste system, so I can't really take the moral high ground here. Fortunately, affirmative action is in place so that may help me save face in the near future. And then there's that other horribly shameful matter of communalism too, which shows up in occasional fits and starts. If you get an opportunity to see *Parzania*, please do. The film is based on the true story of a Parsi couple who lost their son in a mob attack during the 2002 Gujarat riots and are still searching for him, fervently hoping that he wasn't killed. I don't know if you remember reading about the riots? A train compartment carrying Hindu fundamentalists chanting support for the building of a Ram temple on the site of the demolished Babri Masjid was torched, allegedly by a Muslim mob. Retaliation attacks occurred, allegedly with the tacit approval of the Gujarat government. While you may find the visuals of the riots in the film disturbing, remember this: they are not as gruesome and violent as the real images of the horrible event we saw in the media. They've been glossed over. The film has got rave reviews and is doing reasonably well in India, despite the fact that the only heaving bosoms on display here are of mourners, not scantily clad, lavishly endowed, push-up-bra enhanced Bollywood babes. As a matter of interest, Gujarat is the only state that's banned the film. Hmm. Now I wonder why?

If I carry on in this depressing vein, I'll have to pour myself a generous splash of a 60-year-old Macallan to cheer up. (Oh dear, conspicuous consumption rears its ugly head again. Don't *you* feel like killing me now? So my fears about an impending social revolution aren't unfounded, are they?) Back to how good it feels to live in India today again. More and more Indians working abroad are returning to live the good life at home sweet home. And why not? They have great jobs to look forward to, obscene salaries, mummies and daddies to willingly babysit for them (gratis), maids to take care of the housework (no dollar rates), and, best of all, the lifestyle they've got used to in the West is available here, including restaurants that serve world cuisine and lounge bars with that god-awful (in my humble opinion) world music.

Personally, I feel safer and happier than before with the government led by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, and I have no problem if Sonia Gandhi is, as the vicious grapevine goes, the real power behind the throne. She-Who-Must-Be-Obedied is doing a great job in that case, and now I admire more about her than just her exquisite taste in saris. I was worried, initially, that the poor dear may be doomed to eat pizzas, pastas, and tiramisu in extreme secrecy, because the opposition parties are watching her like hawks; any sign of her Italian roots showing is tom-tommed about with outrage. Fortunately, she seems to be holding up pretty well. Good for her!

Well, I must say goodbye now. And do excuse me if I gushed uncontrollably. Maybe the sheer excitement of being part of the elite first-world club has gone to my head. How embarrassing, I absolutely *must* learn to take India's dramatic turn of fortune in my stride.

Published 2007-03-21

Original in English

Contribution by Le Monde diplomatique (Berlin)

First published in Le Monde diplomatique (Berlin) 3/2007 (German version)

© Rupa Gulab/Le Monde diplomatique (Berlin)

© Eurozine