

A tale of two Indias

MARY FITZGERALD in India

Sat, Oct 02, 2010

India is booming, but as the Commonwealth Games brings the country to the world's attention, can it bridge the dangerous divisions and inequality that hold it back?

TO GET A SENSE of the India that officials hoped to showcase at next week's Commonwealth Games, before the event became mired in controversy, it is best to leave behind Delhi's main stadium, with its collapsed footbridge, and head south. In the sprawling suburb of Gurgaon a dizzying transformation is taking place, providing as good a metaphor as any for the changing face of India.

Once little more than a cluster of villages in Delhi's hinterland, Gurgaon is now home to swathes of the capital's wealthy elite. Its inhabitants live in gated communities with such names as Malibu Town and Nirvana Country, where property is priced at more than 300 times the average Indian's annual income. They work in gleaming glass towers housing multinationals such as Pepsi, Honda and Nestlé.

Drive down Gurgaon's main artery, called Mall Road because of its endless stretch of shopping malls, and you could be in Los Angeles. With its call centres and software companies, sushi restaurants and designer outlets, this is the beating heart of a thrusting India buoyed by an economy expected to grow by nearly 9 per cent – double the global average – by the end of this year. This is the brave new India, powered by a burgeoning middle class and driven by superpower aspirations, that the world will find “impossible to ignore”, as foreign secretary Nirupama Rao puts it.

But you don't have to look too closely to see the signs of a very different India among the glitzy malls where consumption is nothing if not conspicuous. At one busy intersection a scrawny barefoot boy weaves in and out of traffic, selling plastic-wrapped copies of Architectural Digest. Here and there are half-finished buildings where squatters have set up home. As dusk falls, the less fortunate hunker down for the night in makeshift tents beneath a nearby overpass.

The view from Gurgaon's high-rises invariably includes teeming slums filled with families drawn from desperately poor villages on Delhi's periphery.

Their India is a world away from the image of a booming nation that this week saw 17 freshly minted billionaires added to a Forbes rich list, or the “Incredible India” of the tourism advertising slogan. The India they inhabit is home to an estimated one-third of the world's poor. It is a country where, government figures show, almost 40 per cent of the country's 1.1 billion citizens struggle to survive below an official poverty line equivalent to less than €6 per month in rural areas and just over €9 in urban areas, a threshold that one Indian analyst says would be more accurately termed a starvation line.

In July, ironically on the day that India launched several advanced satellites, a UN poverty index calculated that the country's number of impoverished people was higher than the figure for the 26 poorest African nations combined. Nearly half of India's young children are malnourished, and more than a third of the world's malnourished under-fives live here. Despite soaring economic growth since 1991, India has failed to reduce the prevalence of malnutrition. Meanwhile, affluent Indian parents fret about the growing trend of childhood obesity.

“There are two Indias,” said Thierry Geiger, an associate director at the World Economic Forum (WEF), earlier this month. “While there is widespread poverty, poor health and education facilities, and poor infrastructure in rural India, the other India is experiencing rapid growth.” He was speaking following the news that India had slipped two places, to 51st, in the WEF’s global competitiveness rankings, while rival China had risen to 29th.

The Commonwealth Games debacle, and the unwelcome international attention it has drawn to some of India’s deeper structural weaknesses, has acted as a timely reminder that the shiny edifice of what some term “India Inc” stands on fragile foundations that could jeopardise its future growth.

The shambolic run-up to the games has highlighted a public sector that, despite almost two decades of reforms, remains hobbled by inefficiency, corruption and incompetence, much to the chagrin of a vibrant private sector that considers itself world class.

It has also shone a spotlight on the challenge of overhauling India’s infrastructure – creaking in some areas, utterly inadequate or non-existent in others – to fit its economic ambitions. And it has thrown into sharp relief the shortcomings of a political elite whose commitment to addressing the country’s multiple woes has yet again been called into question.

MANY OBSERVERS SEE numerous storm clouds gathering, one of the most worrying of which is the growing Maoist insurgency that has carved out a so-called Red Corridor across poverty-stricken central and eastern India. The stated objective of the Maoists is to overthrow a government that they claim – with some justification, as even some of their most virulent critics will concede – has failed to deliver equitable development. They have gained such momentum in recent years that the prime minister, Manmohan Singh, has described their rebellion as India’s greatest internal security threat.

More than 1,000km from the bright lights and highways of Gurgaon lies the tiny village of Takara Guda, in Chhattisgarh, a state considered the epicentre of the Maoist resurgence. The people of Takara Guda, mostly small-scale farmers who depend on crops such as rice and chickpeas, have become key actors in one of the hundreds of bitter land-acquisition and displacement dramas playing out across India’s mineral-rich belt.

Plans by Tata, one of India’s biggest conglomerates, to establish a steel plant in the area are being resisted by the residents of Takara Guda and several other villages under pressure to sell their land. Hidmo Mandavi, the village chief, is scornful of Tata’s offer of a job for one member of each affected family.

“What kind of work would we do?” he asks. “We have worked this land for generations. This is the only life we know. If we leave, where will we go? How would we survive?”

The question of how to survive in the new India is one asked with increasing urgency by the more than 70 per cent of its population that lives in hundreds of thousands of hardscrabble villages not unlike Takara Guda. The convulsions triggered by displacement constitute just one of the tragedies that have befallen rural India as it struggles to cope with harsh, often brutal, new realities.

Another is the fate of indebted farmers, thousands of whom have escaped penury by drinking fatal doses of pesticide.

For activists such as the Booker Prize-winning novelist Arundhati Roy, the mention of whose name often prompts rolling of eyes in official circles, the plight of those who struggle on the margins in villages and urban slums is the story of globalised India and its discontents. In a recent essay in the Indian current affairs magazine Outlook, accompanied by a front-page headline that

sniped “Emerging Power? Ha!”, Roy wrote of “the refugees of India’s shining; the people who are being sloshed around like toxic effluent in a manufacturing process that has gone berserk”.

The prospect of wider instability looms large as disenchantment and resentment percolate among the millions whose lives remain untouched by the much-trumpeted miracle of India’s economic growth.

“There is a tremendous potential for violence, and that is exactly what is being tapped into by the Maoists,” says Ajai Sahni, director of the Delhi-based Institute of Conflict Management. “That potential for violence arises out of the extreme poverty, backwardness, marginalisation and isolation of a very, very large proportion of the population.”

India has always grappled with divisions and inequalities, whether between north and south, urban and rural, rich and poor, or women and men – and that’s not to mention the hierarchies borne of caste, clan and religion that inspired VS Naipaul’s 1991 description of “a country with a million little mutinies”.

While the changes India has seen since the start of economic liberalisation in the early 1990s have, in some cases, served to loosen the bonds of tradition, in others they have accentuated its faultlines. And unlike in the past, when villages such as Takara Guda were largely cut off from the rest of the country, the gradual advent of electricity in India’s more remote corners means that Hidmo Mandavi, and others like him, are all too aware of the excesses of boom India through TV shows in thrall to Bollywood glamour and the new rich.

“People are now realising the extent of inequality and the extent of inequitable growth and development,” says Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw, who heads Biocon, India’s leading biotechnology firm, and who is said to be the country’s richest woman. “A person who is living on the fringes is no longer ignorant of the fact that there are others who live very different lives . . . I think, therefore, you are going to find a lot of unrest and tension between the two economic sections of this society.”

Mindful of this, and the possibility that such a scenario may trip up its much-prized goal of a double-digit growth rate, official India’s mantra has become one of “inclusive growth”, but there is much scepticism regarding the government’s ability to translate such rhetoric into action. “There is a very strong realisation that things must change . . . but the problem is that there is a big difference between talking about something and doing something about it,” says Ajai Sahni.

In the bookstores of India’s cities, numerous tomes offer prescriptions and bold visions for the future under titles such as *Unleashing India*, *Making India Work* and *Imagining India*. For Mazumdar-Shaw, who also acts as Ireland’s honorary consul in Bangalore, the southern city often described as India’s Silicon Valley, the solution lies mainly in improving education and ensuring better health provision. She believes there is much potential for job creation in meeting India’s mammoth infrastructure needs, but admits that addressing the country’s lopsided development will be a gargantuan task.

“You are dealing with a huge problem which you have just turned a blind eye to all these years,” she says. “And suddenly you are waking up because these people, who have been ignored and neglected for so many decades, are making it difficult for you to ignore.”

Foreign secretary Nirupama Rao believes there are lessons to be learned from China’s experience, with its focus on labour-intensive development and improving infrastructure. In contrast, India’s economic growth has been largely concentrated on services, creating better jobs for an educated, predominantly urban minority but failing to generate new opportunities for the wider population.

The number employed by its much-vaunted software companies and call centres remains small compared with the 50 per cent-plus of the population whose often precarious existence depends on

agriculture. For this majority, promises that the prosperity enjoyed by the privileged few will eventually trickle down ring rather hollow.

In the meantime the two Indias grow farther apart by the day. The wealthy pay for private schools and healthcare, splurge in air-conditioned malls, and hanker for ever more ostentatious homes, such as the 27-storey residence, with a \$1 billion price tag, being built in Mumbai by the multibillionaire Mukesh Ambani. The poor chafe under conditions that, according to several measures, are getting worse instead of better.

Bridging the gap between these two Indias is perhaps the greatest challenge facing the country today. "We are racing against time," says Mazumdar-Shaw. "Because if we don't act fast enough these problems are going to mount and escalate, and may finally overwhelm us."

Young and hungry

Tracing India's boom

Although only the 11th largest economy in the world, India is the second fastest-growing in the world, behind China. The genesis of India's boom can be traced back to the early 1990s when then finance minister Manmohan Singh, who is now prime minister, introduced a series of measures to liberalise a moribund economy which had, until then, been characterised by what some disparagingly termed as "the Hindu rate of growth".

Much of the bureaucratic architecture known as "the Licence Raj" was dismantled, tariffs and taxes were lowered, the economy was opened up to trade and investment, and globalisation was tentatively embraced. These reforms helped usher in an economic growth rate that has averaged more than 7 per cent since 1997, and fostered the emergence of a middle class now estimated to number up to 300 million.

Just over half of India's working population is engaged in agriculture, while the services sector, which accounts for more than half of national output, employs only one-third of the workforce.

India's overall population, currently estimated at just over one billion, is growing at 1.55 per cent a year, and many believe the demographic dividend produced by one of the world's youngest populations will enable its economy to soon outrun that of rival China.

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Maoists on the rise in lopsided economy

Mon, Oct 04, 2010

FORTUNES OF INDIA: Dispossessed villagers have an open ear for left-wing extremism, writes **Mary Fitzgerald** in Chhattisgarh

RAMESH WAS an illiterate teenage orphan when he joined the ragtag army that came to his village preaching Maoist revolution. During his years in the jungle he learned to read, write, and fire a gun.

Ramesh says he left his cadre only because he wanted to start a family with a fellow Maoist. The couple now live quietly with their young daughter not far from where, in April, their former comrades ambushed and killed almost 80 paramilitaries - the deadliest attack in a dirty war fought out far from the high-tech companies and Bollywood glamour of boom India.

"The life of armed struggle is no longer for me," Ramesh says, showing an old photograph of him and his wife posing with guns. "But I still believe in the ideas behind it. Who could disagree with fighting on behalf of the poor for a more equal society?"

Just a decade ago, India's Mao-inspired rebels, often called Naxalites after their predecessors who staged an uprising in the West Bengal village of Naxalbari in the late 1960s, had all but faded away. Today, they have a

presence in 223 districts spread throughout 20 of India's 28 states and boast more 10,000 active fighters, with an estimated 100,000 in reserve.

Since 2006, prime minister Manmohan Singh has repeatedly declared the Maoists, who have carved out a so-called "red corridor" across central and eastern India, the country's greatest internal security threat. This year alone, the conflict has claimed the lives of almost 900 people, many of whom were civilians.

As the violence escalates - with the Maoists now turning to tactics including beheading and bombing - the debate over how to tackle this growing insurgency has become bitterly polarised. Confronting the Maoist problem means confronting difficult questions over the nature of development in India - and who benefits from it most.

It is not surprising that "left-wing extremism" - to use Delhi's euphemism - gained momentum during the same decade that witnessed India's economy growing to unprecedented, and dangerously lopsided, levels.

And it is little coincidence that the pockets where the Maoists now hold most sway are also those that contain the country's deepest seams of minerals. Beneath the dense forest that blankets much of Chhattisgarh, a remote state considered the epicentre of the Maoist resurgence, lies one-fifth of India's iron ore plus huge reserves of coal, tin and bauxite - an irresistible trove for the country's industrial titans and foreign investors.

What has played out in Chhattisgarh and other mineral-rich yet impoverished states like it over the past 10 years represents the ugly face of India's boom. The clash between often disastrously mismanaged industrialisation and the traditional agrarian way of life as practised by indigenous tribal people known as *adivasis* has resulted in the dispossession of hundreds of thousands of villagers.

"Development is the most hated word among these people, because in its name they have lost their land, their resources and their dignity," says Rajendra Sail, a lawyer and activist in Chhattisgarh.

In such circumstances, it is not difficult to understand, as several government commissioned reports have concluded, why an ideology promising land and liberation might take seed in isolated villages where the writ of the state has long been absent.

"These people are the poorest of the poor. They have been denied their land rights, their forest rights, and their human rights. Some of them feel that unless and until you challenge the might of the state with guns, it will not listen," says Swami Agnivesh, a social activist who has attempted to mediate between the Maoists and the government.

To counter Maoist influence in Chhattisgarh, a state-sponsored militia known as Salwa Judum (the name translates as "purification hunt" or "peace mission" depending on who you ask) emerged in 2005. What resulted was a spiral of revenge attacks, as each side laid waste to villages suspected of supporting the other.

"It has been a reign of terror," sighs Markam Iria, who fled to one of several displacement camps after the Maoists killed both his father and uncle. "The problem is there appears to be no end in sight."

The clearing of villages that just happen to straddle prime mining territory has led some activists to suspect a murky nexus between state-backed security operations and efforts to tap resources. As the situation becomes increasingly tense, anyone who questions the current development narrative in Chhattisgarh runs the risk of being branded a Maoist sympathiser.

"There is a full spectrum of resistance but the government wants to simplify the picture and reduce all the colours to one," says Binayak Sen, a paediatrician and civil rights activist who was detained for two years after he was accused of helping Maoists. More than 20 Nobel laureates supported an international campaign for his release.

"We must have a process by which the people's voices can be heard in the processes of economy and development," Sen says. "We can never be at peace if such large sections of the population are being ground underfoot."

As the conflict grinds on, with the Maoists now ironically funding their campaign by extorting road contractors and mining companies as well as collecting taxes from villagers, the authorities have struggled to agree on how best to confront the insurgency. Some insist the Maoists should be snuffed out by force. Late last year the government deployed thousands of extra security personnel throughout the worst-hit regions, but to little avail.

Others argue that any strategy must include an effort to address local grievances exploited by the rebels. Many, like BK Ponwar, a retired brigadier who runs a Chhattisgarh training centre established to teach police to "fight a guerrilla like a guerrilla" as its slogan boasts, believe the response must incorporate both security and development. "I tell my men that many of the Naxals are simply misled people who have taken up arms," he says. "We must wean them off."

The government frets that the Maoists, who have attacked railway lines, roads and other infrastructure, are deterring development and frightening off investment. Last month India's tough-talking home minister Palaniappan Chidambaram attempted to assuage the concerns of skittish investors, telling them he was confident the government would soon be able to regain control of territory where the Maoists currently run what effectively amounts to a parallel administration.

Both sides have at different stages indicated a readiness to begin peace talks, but there is much distrust of the other's true intentions. In July, Maoist leader Cherukuri Rajkumar, alias Azad, was shot in what authorities described as an "encounter killing" just as he was apparently about to open

negotiations through the mediation of Swami Agnivesh. Amid widespread scepticism over the circumstances surrounding Azad's death, the possibility of talks now seems ever more remote. Swami Agnivesh insists there is no other way. "If [the Maoists] continue the way they have been doing, and the state continues repressing them the way they have been doing, then it will be never-ending violence and counter-violence," he says. "It is time to say stop this madness. The guns should stop and the talks begin."

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IT jobs trickling down to rural India

MARY FITZGERALD, Foreign Affairs Correspondent in Bagepalli, southern India

Tue, Oct 05, 2010

A call centre company called Rural Shores is trying to bring the two Indias a little closer together

WITH FANS whirring lazily overhead, several lines of young men and women peer at flickering computer screens as the sound of hundreds of fingers tapping on keyboards fills the room. At first glance, the scene could be that of any office in the high-tech hubs that have mushroomed in many of India's cities over the past decade, helping propel an economic growth rate of almost 9 per cent this year.

But this is Bagepalli, a sleepy town of some 20,000 people deep in rural Karnataka. In the dusty market, barefoot traders sell their produce to locals who depend mostly on farming and labouring to make a living. Some two hours' drive – and a world – away is the bustling city of Bangalore, India's Silicon Valley and home to IT giants Infosys and Wipro. When a company named Rural Shores began data processing operations here in Bagepalli two years ago, it was an attempt to bridge those two worlds and bring urban and rural India just that bit closer.

“We asked ourselves: instead of bringing the people to the jobs, why don't we just bring the jobs to the people?” says Rural Shores chief executive Murali Vullaganti.

Only a small fraction of India's 1.2 billion people work in the country's predominantly urban-based IT and services sector. Given that 70 per cent of Indians live in villages and small towns like Bagepalli, the question of how to bring the boom beyond the cities is crucial to India's future prospects.

“Unless economic development happens at the rural level, the growth that India is experiencing today is not going to be sustainable in the long-term,” says Vullaganti.

Since the Bagepalli centre opened in 2008, Rural Shores has moved into several other Indian states. It plans to establish 500 centres across India by 2017. Each will employ 150 to 200 people.

The company's literature boasts of its aim to “assimilate rural India into the knowledge economy”. Most of those who work at the low-slung Rural Shores building near an ashram on the outskirts of Bagepalli are the first in their families to experience anything beyond agricultural work, let alone office life. The majority have completed secondary school, and some have begun to study for degrees by correspondence course. “When they started here, around 90 per cent, while they knew what computers were, had never seen one before,” says Ganesha Subramanian, a manager from Bangalore. “But they are fast learners, and we have learned much from them too.”

Surrounded by walls hung with posters carrying slogans emphasising success and customer service, the employees, mostly in their 20s, handle data entry work for Indian and multinational companies, including insurance and logistics firms. They also answer customer queries through e-mails.

To get to the Rural Shores centre, M Venkatesh (24) travels more than 40km from his village every day on his scooter. “There are no other opportunities for young people in this area,” he says. “I have learned to type and my English has improved through talking to managers. Having a guaranteed monthly pay cheque means a lot.”

V Aruna (21) was one of the first people employed by Rural Shores when it opened. “Before, people had to go to Bangalore if they wanted to find this kind of job. Life there was expensive and very often people felt lonely so far from home. Now we can do this work without moving out of our comfort zone,” she says. “We can stay living with our parents – that is very important for us.”

For E Pushpa (20) the work gives her a sense of independence she once only dreamt of. “My parents wanted me to get married as quickly as possible but I would like to become a social worker,” she says. “I give half my salary to my parents, and use the rest for a correspondence course. Having money I have earned myself is very liberating.”

Stories like that of Pushpa help illustrate how India’s economic growth is also ushering in something of a quiet revolution in terms of values and aspirations, particularly for young women.

But in the conservative heartlands of rural India, there is much wariness when it comes to what is sometimes referred to as “call-centre culture”. Several Indian films and novels have portrayed the life of a call centre worker as one of endless office flirtations and even premarital sex – still taboo in a society where most marriages are arranged. The weight of tradition in rural areas means companies like Rural Shores must tread carefully. Managers have met with local elders to assuage concerns, and the centre does not operate an overnight shift. “Some convincing was required at the beginning because parents of young women were concerned about the image this kind of work sometimes has in the cities,” says Vullaganti. “We need to be careful that we only bring the jobs, not import the culture. We must be conscious of the fact the social fabric here is different from the cities.”

Rural Shores was one of the first companies to explore rural India’s potential for business process outsourcing (BPO). Much of the impetus stemmed from the need to keep the industry – worth almost €9 billion in India – competitive, particularly as other countries, including the Philippines, tried to muscle in. “Outsourcing the outsourcing” to rural India means operating costs are cut by half. Pay scales at Rural Shores start at 3,400 rupees (around €60) per month. The same work in Bangalore would command double that amount. But, managers argue, the cost of living in Bagepalli and its environs is much less – the average monthly household income here is 2,500-3,000 rupees.

Several other companies have followed the example of Rural Shores, opening similar operations in different parts of India. The firm has received several awards. The government has made offers of partnership.

“They are asking us how they can help us grow further, and in other states,” says Vullaganti. “The idea has now gone mainstream.”

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Boom for 'God men' as new rich seek balm for the soul

Wed, Oct 06, 2010

FORTUNES OF INDIA: India's middle classes are not becoming more secular and their wealth has turned religion into a big business, writes **MARY FITZGERALD**, Foreign Affairs Correspondent, in Karnataka, India

INSIDE THE imposing five-storey meditation hall shaped like a lotus and covered with more than 1,000 marble petals, there are representations of several Hindu deities, but none as prominent as that of Lakshmi, a goddess of wealth and prosperity.

Every year, millions come here to the sprawling headquarters of the Art of Living Foundation, located close to Bangalore. It is from these lush surroundings that Sri Sri Ravi Shankar – once dubbed “India's Pat Robertson” by author William Dalrymple – peddles breathing techniques along with an approach to spirituality that has proved phenomenally successful with the country's urban elite.

Many of those who flock to the man they call Guruji are young Indians working in the country's thriving high-tech sector who feel pulled between tradition and their role as players in India's rush towards globalised modernity.

They praise Sri Sri's stress-relieving meditation exercises and say his teachings help add depth to their high-powered lives. Some, like twentysomething Karthik, an Indian engineer who previously worked in the US and Europe, even choose to give it all up for a job with the foundation.

“In the rat race of daily life, they are really longing for something that binds them, especially in the urban areas,” says Sri Sri, a man in his 50s dressed in flowing white robes. Many of the devotees milling outside have copied his appearance, right down to his long hair and beard. “People are rediscovering their roots and finding new meaning in their lives. They want to feel more purpose in what they are doing.”

A former disciple of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, the man who introduced the Beatles and many others to transcendental meditation, Sri Sri has developed Art of Living into something of a global empire – the foundation claims 20 million people have taken its meditation courses. He is the most prominent of a burgeoning band of “God Men” – TV-appearing gurus offering balm for the souls of India's new rich.

Their popularity reflects a wider trend of growing piety in India, the subject of a recent book by Delhi academic Meera Nanda. She notes that India's rise in a globalised world has not only made the country wealthier, but also more religious.

“Globalisation has been good for the gods,” as she puts it in *The God Market*.

A 2007 survey conducted by the Delhi-based Centre for the Study of Developing Societies found that levels of religiosity in India had risen significantly. Interestingly, the same poll noted that “urban educated Indians are more religious than their rural and illiterate counterparts”.

India is now home to some 2.5 million temples and other places of worship – compared with only 1.5 million schools and 75,000 hospitals. Religious tourism is booming – pilgrimages now account for more than 50 per cent of all package tours.

“It is becoming fashionable to be religious and to be seen as being religious . . . rather than retiring their gods, as secularisation theory expected, the emerging middle classes in India are remaking them,” writes Nanda. “The local deities who were once considered guardians of the village, and protected against scourges like smallpox, are now being beseeched for blessings for success in an increasingly competitive urban environment.”

The religious revival is not just confined to Hindus, who make up more than 80 per cent of the population, but is also being felt within India’s Muslim, Christian and Sikh communities.

Social activist Swami Agnivesh believes it may have something to do with the unease prompted by social and cultural shifts that have followed the country’s embrace of economic liberalisation.

“India is not able to reconcile this imposed materialism and superficiality with the innate spirituality that exists here,” he says. “The conflict that results from this rages within every individual.” There are plenty of critics of what Nanda calls “karma capitalism” and others have dismissed it as “spiritual fast food”. In a debate with Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, Javed Akhtar, one of India’s leading screenwriters, decried the mushrooming of “crash courses in self-realisation – cosmic consciousness in four easy lessons” and labelled spirituality “the tranquilliser of the rich”.

Preeti, who works for a software company in Bangalore, describes the appeal for some of her peers as little more than “belonging to the right club”. On the journey back from the Art of Living ashram, my driver, a young father struggling to survive as life in his hometown of Bangalore gets more expensive, says such places only welcome the rich.

Others worry about the political undertones of India’s growing religiosity in a country still haunted by the ghosts of communal violence. A 2007 Pew survey which revealed that more than 90 per cent of Indian respondents – the highest in the world – agreed with the statement “our people are not perfect, but our culture is superior to others” was interpreted by some as a signal of Hindu triumphalism.

“The same innovations in religious ritual and dogmas that are enabling the ‘Great Indian Middle Class’ to adjust to global capitalism are also deepening a sense of Hindu chauvinism, and widening the chasm between Hindus and non-Hindu minorities,” writes Nanda.

The far-right Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the Hindu nationalist organisation to which Mahatma Gandhi’s killer had belonged, and from which the BJP, which governed India from 1999 until 2004, sprang, has wooed large numbers of young professionals. Many popular gurus, including Sri Sri, have been linked with nationalist groups.

This resurgence in popular Hinduism comes as more rigid interpretations of Islam find root. In July, a university lecturer in Kerala had his hand chopped off by Muslim activists alleging blasphemy. But many drew comfort from the muted response to last week’s anxiously awaited verdict on the Ayodhya mosque dispute which had unleashed widespread violence between Hindus and Muslims in 1992. For now, it seems, the threat of conflict remains dormant.

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Caste divisions remain an obstacle to India's progress

Thu, Oct 07, 2010

FORTUNES OF INDIA: A government decision to conduct a caste census next year has sharpened the debate on the place of caste in India's fast-changing society, writes **MARY FITZGERALD** in India

SUNITA JATAV never imagined that something as innocuous as feeding some leftover chapatti to a local dog would incur the wrath of her village council.

Nor did she expect elders to impose a fine of 15,000 rupees (€245) – an enormous sum for any villager.

Her crime? Sunita is a Dalit, a categorisation that puts her on the lowest rung of India's millennia-old caste system. According to the dog's upper caste owner, the animal had been rendered "untouchable" by the simple act of taking food from her.

The incident, which took place in the central state of Madhya Pradesh last month, is one of the more bizarre manifestations of an ancient social hierarchy which remains stubbornly prevalent in India's fast-changing society.

India's 1949 constitution abolished caste and introduced a system of quotas in areas such as education to encourage a levelling of the inequalities formed by it. But caste's continuing shadow over a modernising India reveals itself in many ways: from the hundreds of caste-related crimes, including murder, rape and arson, recorded each year; to the caste-obsessed matrimonial ads in newspapers and matchmaking websites; and the practice of separate cups for Dalits that prevails in many rural tea shops.

Despite the advent of a burgeoning middle class, sociologists say the caste system, which was originally based on occupation, remains the biggest obstacle to social mobility.

Given that less than 5 per cent of the country's 1.2 billion people are upper caste Brahmins, and more than 70 percent derive from lower castes, enduring caste divisions present a formidable challenge to India's future prospects.

But the answer to the question of how much caste matters in India today changes as you travel from the impoverished states of India's north to its prosperous south. For several reasons, including a traditionally strong emphasis on education, the grip of caste has loosened to a far greater degree in southern India. The region boasts several successful entrepreneurs who have emerged from the lower castes. In the north, however, progress has been hobbled by political parties that have exploited caste identity as a way to mobilize voters. Such is the power of caste in the politics of northern India that, as the hoary expression puts it, people don't cast their vote; they vote their caste.

Chandra Bhan Prasad, the first Dalit to have a regular column in a national newspaper, believes economic growth will help loosen the bonds of caste. "It will weaken the caste system because the market is the greatest leveller," he argues. For Prasad, a former Maoist revolutionary who now speaks of the potential of what he calls "Dalit capitalism", urbanisation is also key. Caste has always been more easily escaped in the anonymity of India's cities, very often through the

changing of Dalit surnames. And economic growth, together with technological advances, has ushered in new occupations that are caste-neutral.

“If India becomes predominantly urban, and remember there are predictions that by the year 2050 more than 40 per cent of Indians will live in urban areas, I believe caste will lose its force,” Prasad says.

“India will not become caste-free in the foreseeable future, but it can become caste-neutral.”

In recent years, the decades-old affirmative action programme which reserves a certain number of university places and government jobs for lower castes, has become increasingly controversial. Other groups are clamouring for similar benefits and there are demands for caste quotas to be introduced to the private sector. Many complain the quota system is riddled with corruption, with people pretending to be lower caste to take advantage.

Others gripe that while the quota system has helped nurture a small Dalit middle class, it has also reinforced social stratification. And in many cases, says Kiran Martin, director of Asha, an Irish Aid funded NGO which works in Delhi’s slums, those most in need remain unaware of what they are entitled to.

“Even if they do know, they have no clue about how to obtain the [caste-certifying] documents which will enable them to get reservations in educational institutions and jobs,” she says. “And then they have to battle all the corruption that exists within the system.” One element of Asha’s work is helping teenagers living in slums, including many from the lower castes, apply for third-level education. “When they access this right of theirs and go on to attend university, the process of integration is amazing to see,” says Martin. “There is so much potential.”

The debate over the place of caste in today’s India has sharpened following the government’s announcement last month that it will include a tabulation of the country’s mosaic of castes in next year’s census — the first such caste count since British rule. There are concerns that new caste calculations could trigger much upheaval, given that present policies are based on extrapolations from the last survey in 1931. Supporters of the move believe proper measuring of the size of the different caste groups is necessary to help the government target affirmative action benefits more efficiently. But critics fear a caste census would only encourage the growth of caste-based political parties and bolster politicians who already rely on caste identification to shore up votes. Others wonder why India, which considers itself a progressive nation with superpower ambitions, would undertake such a “regressive” headcount.

“By returning to the old categories established under colonial rule, the present regime will be making an admission of our failure to transform ourselves into a nation of citizens,” wrote Andre Beteille, professor emeritus of sociology at Delhi University, in a recent commentary.

Meanwhile, Chandra Bhan Prasad recounts his recent visit to a village in Uttar Pradesh. There he was told that the son of local Brahmins, having struggled to make a living from the land, bought some buffaloes and now sells milk to some 50 Dalit households. “I never thought in my life that we would see a Brahmin selling milk to Dalits in a village,” Prasad says.

“Stories like this give me hope that India is changing.”

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India stakes its claim

Fri, Oct 08, 2010

INDIA IS so much more than “impossible to ignore”. This is the understated claim made for it by foreign secretary Nirupama Rao to *The Irish Times* recently. Seventeen per cent of the world’s population, 1.2 billion people, half of them under 24, live in the huge, vibrant and glorious mass of contradictions that is India. Its booming economy is expected to grow by nearly 9 per cent this year, double the global average and faster than China.

It is the world’s largest democracy. It is a nuclear, regional and world power and is now staking a claim to its place at the top table of global politics and economics as of right. It is an extraordinary culture and civilisation. But it is a land of profound contrasts, of what VS Naipaul called “a million little mutinies”, as our foreign affairs correspondent Mary Fitzgerald’s series *India’s Fortunes* has illustrated vividly over the last week. Although its 300 million-strong new middle class revels in the fruits of a boom that will see the country overtake the world’s second largest economy – Japan – by 2032, millions also remain trapped in the direst of poverty. There are more below the poverty line than in the 26 poorest African nations combined. Nearly half of India’s young children are malnourished and one-third of the population between 15 and 35 are functionally illiterate.

Urbanisation – India accounts for 10 of the 30 fastest-growing urban areas in the world – and modernisation co-exist with traditions like arranged marriage; deep caste prejudice and discrimination remain powerfully embedded; in rural areas where thousands of impoverished farmers have taken their lives by drinking pesticide, Maoist-inspired militias carry on a bloody war in 223 districts in 20 of India’s 28 states; in Kashmir a young intifada is under way; and Hindu-Muslim tensions remain a tinder box capable of exploding any time. A resurgent popular Hinduism is mirrored by growing support for more rigid interpretations of Islam, although a recent court ruling sharing the site of the disputed temple of Ayodhya does give some hope.

The Commonwealth Games were meant to enhance the country’s prestige but the litany of problems that plagued them, from collapsed footbridges and filthy accommodation, to blatant corruption, only served to expose to embarrassing international attention a seriously dysfunctional political system infected with cronyism and nepotism. At least 21 government agencies were notionally involved in preparing for the games, yet none was in charge.

However, for all its woes, secular India is still a remarkable success story that has seen it triumphantly overcome the legacy of its bloody founding and the decades of lethargic economic development that followed. Its decade of growth has made it an indispensable force for stability in the region, not least in its tense relationship with Pakistan, and a key partner in global governance in the G20 group of nations as part of the BRIC alliance with Russia, China and Brazil. India is not only “impossible to ignore”, it deserves a far more central place in Ireland’s China-centered “Asia Strategy”.

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Rupees and rituals: the rise and rise of Bollywood brides

Fri, Oct 08, 2010

FORTUNES OF INDIA : Weddings have become showcases for the new wealth of India's growing middle classes, but beneath the glitzy surface many traditional practices remain, writes **MARY FITZGERALD** in New Delhi

WHEN IT comes to her forthcoming nuptials, Ritika has a firm idea of what she wants. "My wedding will be simple and elegant," she says. Her mother Kumkum nods in agreement. "I recently attended a wedding which was way over the top," she recalls. "People are throwing their money away on weddings."

With her dreams of a low-key celebration, Ritika, a 25-year-old IT consultant from the historic city of Jaipur in northern India, is something of a rarity in a country where there are few better barometers of changing values and aspirations than what is often referred to as the Big Fat Indian Wedding. That said, Ritika's idea of a simple event still involves up to 700 guests.

Mother and daughter are browsing at Bridal Asia, a three-day event which bills itself as India's largest wedding fair. With the country's burgeoning middle class – now estimated at up to 300 million – turning weddings into showcases of their swelling disposable income, the business of getting married has spawned an industry worth the equivalent of tens of billions of euro annually. Wedding malls, selling everything a bride needs under one roof, have opened in several cities. Banks advertise special wedding loans. India's wedding season, which begins in October, is slavishly tracked by dozens of magazines including domestic editions of Vogue and Hello! Two decades of economic liberalisation have created a new monied class all too eager to shrug off the austerity that marked India's post-independence period, with its mix of Nehruvian socialism and Gandhian idealism. And nowhere is this more evident than when the sons and daughters of boom India get married. "Weddings were always sources of extravagance and indebtedness but this was within limits imposed by community pressure and the need to not be too much out of line with your neighbours or caste-fellows," says sociologist Patricia Uberoi. "Nowadays it's a case of whatever you can afford and more – plus there's a market to enable you to do all that."

Jamila and Seema Malhotra, designers from Bangalore whose work has appeared in films such as Elizabeth and Shakespeare in Love, have watched Indian weddings grow ever showier in tandem with the country's rapid economic growth. Increasingly demanding brides request increasingly lavish wedding trousseaux, often with real pearls and semi-precious stones sewn into the fabric. The Malhotras are regularly asked to work with couples who have opted for "destination weddings" overseas. "People have more money and they want to show off their wealth," says Seema. "The glamour of Bollywood has also been a huge influence."

Jewellery designer Falguni Mehta agrees. "It's all about making a statement now," she says. "Everybody wants their wedding to be much bigger and better than anyone else's."

The exhibitors at Bridal Asia, held at an upmarket Delhi hotel, reflect the increasingly internationalised tastes of many upwardly mobile Indians. Wedding menus include Japanese, Thai and Italian cuisine. A confectionery company offers florentines, truffles and cupcakes in lieu of traditional sweetmeats.

Wedding planners – another recent phenomenon – say the minimum budget they work with is around €25,000, while the more affluent are known to spend up to €1.5 million. Costs like this

help explain the wisecrack that India's divorce rate remains one of the lowest in the world because neither the bride's nor groom's family are willing to subject themselves to near-bankruptcy ever again.

Jokes aside, many are uneasy with the profligacy that has come to characterise Indian weddings. The chief minister of Kerala, a southern state that boasts India's highest education levels, recently launched a campaign against ostentatious nuptials.

He argued that social pressures to have ever bigger and more expensive celebrations were leaving more people in debt, as well as contributing to suicide and domestic violence rates. Sociologists have linked the rise in female foeticide – estimated to run to some five million cases annually – and the continuing, yet illegal, practice of dowry to such pressures. In 2007, the leaders of Delhi's Sikh community raised similar concerns when they issued wedding guidelines in order to curb some of the worst excesses.

“Our fight is against the exploitation by those who pose demands on the girl's family to organise elaborate weddings,” said Paramjit Singh Sarna, president of the city's main Sikh body. “It is this splurge of wealth on ceremonies which is promoting dowry and practices like female foeticide.” But scratch the glitzy surface of weddings in boom India and you will find traditions like arranged marriage still hold sway at all levels of society.

“Arranged marriages still dominate and I don't think that is going to die out anytime soon,” says Shipra, a 20-something Delhi woman, as she examines gold necklaces featuring bejewelled representations of Lakshmi, the Hindu goddess of wealth, and Ganesha, the elephant-headed god of success, at Bridal Asia. “Arranged marriages work, and, anyway, people prefer to stay with their own kind.”

Retisha, who works in marketing, bucked tradition when she had what is often referred to as a “love marriage”. “My parents were not happy at the beginning but they eventually came round,” she says. “Many of my friends also married for love, but it is still quite unusual.”

Somewhere in between arranged and love marriages are the unions made through a growing number of matchmaking websites. Detailed matrimonial ads, most of which specify caste, have long been carried in India's newspapers. But companies like Bharat Matrimony, which offers online services as well as walk-in centres where counsellors help find a prospective spouse, have become hugely popular, especially among young professionals. As is so often the case in the new India, technology helps one of the world's youngest populations negotiate a path between tradition and modernity.

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