

India to Bharat via Frankfurt, Nairobi

I had a rather typical educated, north Indian, nomadic professional's child upbringing. Naya Nangal, Nagpur, Goa, Belgaum, Jaipur, Nagpur, Delhi, Bangalore education in "convent" schools/colleges. Till I was about 13 I thought in Hindi, after that in English. Importance of education, honesty and unstated nationalism were givens.

My first memories, of early 1960s, are of hearing that Nehruji had come by helicopter to inaugurate Bhakra Nangal dam, one of "temples of Modern India". Clearer are memories of playing in trenches dug in front of our house during the 1962 war with China, with a Japanese toy gun given by my merchant navy mama. And blackened windows and air raid sirens.

Nangal was mini-India, besides Punjabis (I can't remember a Sardar), there were Mukherjees, Anthonys, Murthys and people like us from all over North India. So, it was shocking to go back there in 2005 and find it hard to find a non-Sardar.

At college in Delhi, the Emergency happened. It did not mean much to us. No union elections, no ragging, some DAVP pamphlets talking about Anushasan Parv. No knowledge of the mass resettlement in Delhi or the sterilisation program. But the elections in 1977, in my final year, created a flutter. One could not but be anti-government.

Vijay Verghese, whose father George Verghese was a well known journalist who contested and lost in that election, was a hostel mate. But before this we, I think me and Rajiv Agrawal, went to the now famous Ramlila ground rally of the Janta Party. The government had taken all buses off the road, they were showing Bobby on the TV, but the crowds just kept swelling. The empty roads were filled with people in high spirits, streaming towards Ramlila ground. JP was there on his wheel chair. If I remember correctly, Jagjivan Ram had jumped ship. But what I remember most vividly was Prakash Singh Badal, with his flowing beard saying they would win all the 13 seats in Punjab, and the crowd roaring. We were laughing at his audacity, not believing him even for a moment. They did go on to win all the 13 seats!

Come vote counting night , we kept going to the only water cooler in the college, and ringing up Raj Narain's election agent, number courtesy Verghese, from the only public phone available, using an empty cigarette packet in a gap on the side to connect the call, to avoid putting coins. We were schooled in this art by Mathai. And kept laughing at his reports of Narain leading Mrs Gandhi, till we read the paper the next day.

More seriously the Emergency and its aftermath made us think about the country and what we stood for. Clearly I stood for freedom. In a college that produced IAS officers by the dozen each year, I became skeptical about working for the government, given what the government and the people in the bureaucracy had done during the emergency.

And maybe for lack of choice we headed for the new flavor in town, the IIMs. I had got admission at FMS, Delhi but barely made it to the recently started IIM-Bangalore. Within 3 months it became clear that doing a MBA without work experience was a no-brainer, so I did a reading binge, which has lasted to this day, in social sciences and economics. The library

was then in a shed, but the selection of books was great. Virtually every good book one could think of was there. So, I went from one book to another. Discovered MN Srinivas and sanskritisation, which gives one a handle on what is going on in our society.

Speaking of Srinivas, we had an unforgettable lecture by him. This was 1978. 4 of us, the non-corporate types, Gautam Brahma, S Rajgopalan, Venkatesh and me floated a specialisation in Economic Planning. With Apte (later Director), Indira Rajaraman (later member of Finance Commission) and another Prof. (Srinivasan?) teaching us. All I can remember now is Srinivas, with his utterly professorial demeanour (broad forehead, disheveled hair, sandals, casual clothes and piercing eyes) saying "All I see is blood". Again disbelief. But how prescient he was. He was referring to the strains in Indian society. After this were Punjab, Kashmir, Mandal, Babri Masjid, Gujarat and to this day. So, it was possible to see what others could not see. What is needed is moral and intellectual integrity.

By the end of the first year I decided that I wanted to work at National Dairy Development Board's new oil seed project, which was aimed at revolutionising the Oilseed sector like Operation Flood had done for milk. I did two projects in milk to beef up my credentials. NDDDB came for campus, were not the hot employer, and I was so keen to show my interest, till the Director interviewing said, you have got the job, now go. Now, I tell students this is how your interview should go. I also applied to the Planning Commission for a 1 year position as a Consultant in Monitoring Systems and got it. So, from the very beginning I was not the corporate type, but as the saying goes, "paapi pet ke liye, kya, kya nahi karna padta" or the song "ye tere pyaar mein kya, kya na bana dilbar".

We had to do a social involvement project and I did it at a NGO in Rajasthan, where a college mate, Deshpande (now a Prof at Delhi Univ) was on a "sabbatical". I did it on the economics of the weaving of jaat lehnga. Each caste had a certain kind of lehnga. Nothing came out of it. This NGO gave an opportunity for students from our college to take a year off to "find" themselves. It was the first time that I was asked "kun jaat" (what caste ?) by every villager I met.

The NGO had been in that place for 10-15 years then. I remember being told that Robert McNamara, the then head of the World Bank, had visited them and asked them if they had been able to change attitudes of villagers, to which the answer was no. Since then I have never tried to pretend that we could. If we did it would be a bonus.

McNamara is a man worth knowing. "Fogs of War" documentary on youtube on his dilemmas is a must see. It is said that he maxed the GMAT test for admission to Harvard, became President of Ford Motors with a bunch of number crunching whiz kids. Was picked by Kennedy to be Secretary of Defense, and was infamous for his monitoring the number of people killed per bomb in the Vietnam war. An epitome of what evil an intellect without moral moorings can end up doing. Then at the World Bank he became a saint and revolutionised it. To this day, it bears his stamp, but it has lost its pre-eminence in the development realm. In the 1970s to 1990s it was a very influential place, holding the purse strings, making (or distorting ?) policies. Montek Ahluwalia, who had so much to do with Economic Reform between 1980-2010 in our country, as Economics Affairs Secretary,

Governor Reserve Bank, Dy Chairman, Planning Commission, was the poster boy of its Young Professionals Program. Montek on his return to India, is said to have said, “bahut paisa kama liya, ab kuchh naam kamaana hai”. Which he did.

NDDDB was a wonderful place and seeing Dr Kurien even from a distance was an experience. He drove a white Fiat, which had an A/c. That the professional should be comfortable but still frugal. But the Oilseed Project, which I joined, mimicked milk when the two commodities were very different. One perishable, the other not; one perinial the other once or twice a year. But the party line was the same. Cooperatives etc. I had a short stint at Sumerpur depot in Rajasthan and came face to face with the wide price fluctuations and the street smartness of oil traders. We were leaden footed in comparison. Later at Hindustan Lever I saw that even they depended on oil traders to buy their oil and not solely on professionals like us, and for good reason. So, in 3 months I packed my bags and joined Planning Commission. It took NDDDB 10 years to realise the same.

Dr Kurien is gold standard for me. What an Indian professional should be. From the lives he impacted, way he showed forward, a national industry and structure he created; undoubtedly he is amongst the 5 people who have contributed most to Independent India. But even our Agriculture college students now have to be prodded to remember him. They know Amul and then they recollect him.

In 4 years I changed 4 jobs. NDDDB, Planning Commission, Hindustan Lever, TCS, each time like my father at a lower salary, and then joined Bajaj Tempo at Pune. We married in 1981 and since Sujata could have a teaching career, having topped the University, and I had seen enough of the Corporate world to know I did not want to tie my life to it. Looking down from the 13th floor flat at Cuffe Parade of my boss in Levers I wondered where our children would play. So, I moved to Pune and then began my real journey from India to Bharat.

Pune then had a distinct culture. What is a good life ? It meant excelling at something, and being interested in music, drama, literature. As Jaswant Singh remarked that in his time at NDA, which must have been the 1960s, music sprang from every house as one walked by. It meant simplicity and privately supported public institutions like Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institution, Agharkar Research Institute, Karve educational institutions, Gokhale Institute, the numerous regular educational institutions like Fergusson College etc. Till then I had never encountered a coherent and clear culture. It prodded me to understand it, its origins.

It meant public discourse of a high order. Even today the Agarkar and Tilak debate of 1880s on what should come first social change or political change is relevant. Tilak won and we won Independence. But Agarkar was right. Political change without social change is meaningless. We are short on social change and ruining it. Still we are obsessed with politics when we should be obsessed with developments in society. GP Deshpande’s play “Tilak and Agarkar” is a must read.

It also meant Indian industry with the Bajajs, Firodias, Kirloskars, Shirkes, Kalyanis and numerous SMEs making parts and machinery.

College of Engineering had started in 1850s, with Visvesarayya graduating from there in the 1890s. As anti-brahmanism took root in Maharashtra and government jobs started closing to them from the 1960s, educated brahmins got into small industry, creating a huge entrepreneurial base. It is always a confluence of, culmination of developments that creates something.

So, because of its long standing tradition of education, of public discourse, of political seat of Maratha power, of a remembrance of independence being the last area to fall to the British, attracting talent, Pune was what it was. But one had to go back to its sant tradition, people like Ramdas, the “waari” to Pandharpur understand its fabric.

Almost a decade ago, traveling to Nagpur I was seated next to an American. I thought he would be a business executive but he turned out to be a manager for 30 long years of a “dargah” at Ahmednagar! And he said “your society’s fabric is multi-layered. It will not tear apart easily”. Spurred me to try and understand our fabric.

YB Chavan, the key political leader of moral and intellectual caliber, Maharashtra has produced in Independent India, lay the ground for its industrial development. Through Industrial Development Corporations (MIDC) creating industrial estates in every district. His other innovation Zilla Parishad lay the groundwork for a development oriented administration and creation of a training ground for political leadership. Sugar cooperatives were the third peg of this stool. It is hard to believe that Chavan was the Chief Minister for less than 5 years. In this short period he created a blueprint and an indelible impact on the state. More than the Nehru vs Patel, I believe Indira vs Chavan choice has been more material to our development. Even if this choice was never debated, like the Nehru, Patel one!

I had to learn Marathi so that our son heard one language at home. Reading Sakal on the 30 minute ride to work, helped. My father and Sujata’s, had learnt English reading the Times of India. I was traveling backwards. The script being Devnagari and most words being similar helped. Later when I had to visit Kinetic’s Ahmednagar factory, it helped to know a smattering of Marathi, else people would shut one out.

In 1992 I was asked to lecture Trade Union leaders of Bajaj Auto in Marathi on the Indian economy, when it was facing the first difficult sales situation. God alone knows what I spoke and what they understood. My marathi has improved, especially after Wardha.

Even earlier, after taking union leaders to a trip to Nagar, a 2 hour ride I had realised that workers in large companies had become middle class and posed no hurdle to instituting change. During the ride all they talked about was the education of their children, and which careers had “scope”. The Union leaders at Bajaj Auto were even more explicit. They said, we know that if we lose our jobs then we won’t get a third of the salary we get. So please do your job and make sure the products you people decide to make sell. Division of labor! Since then the company made major changes in the plant but did not face any real resistance from labor.

It was while on secondment from Tempo to Kinetic that I visited Mauritius and Nairobi in 1985 to sell Luna. It was my first trip abroad and profoundly educative. From grappling with the knobs in the bathroom to control the shower, to a very smart and hard nosed government which did not permit back packing tourism with minimum rents in hotels and was attracting FDI from Hongkong capitalising on the anxiety of change of its status. But it was hard to digest hearing that "Indian shit, meaning our poor quality products, would not do". Anger rose within me, they could not make a pin and they were lecturing us about quality.

At Nairobi what hit me was the sense of insecurity and the sharp inequality. I lived in the business district, quite like Nariman Point, but as evening fell, the village took over the place and all kinds of street shops sprung up. At night security men with truncheons guarded the glass paneled shops. Most people lived barely 3 kms from the place but thought it beneath their dignity to ride bikes, even when they could no longer afford cars. But even clerks were wearing suits. They had no higher education to speak of, because all it created was unemployables. My flight was around 10 pm, but I was advised to reach the airport before sundown.

I came back appreciating our country. We had industry. We had education. We had safety. Women could ride out alone till late night in Pune. We had a functioning, even if bumbling, democracy. This was reinforced when I met, much later, Pakistanis at a British Council event in Dubai. They were all praise for the direction we had taken and rued their country's decisions. At Dubai I also realised that it is hard to tell a Pakistani from a North Indian. We are the same ethnic stock. They too were clean shaven.

At Tempo I learnt a lesson about the importance of concept. The company was setting up a new plant near Indore, to produce the Traveller van. At the first meeting the German engineers asked, what was our project concept? It was met with an uncomfortable silence from our side. We were still in an era of shortages and waiting periods and had no conception of demand estimation. Moreover the project was of re-erecting a disassembled plant in Germany to keep capital costs down. That had been the business strategy of the company almost from inception. The engineers asked, a bit irritably, how many vehicles will you produce? How many units can the plant produce was our rejoinder. 30,000 a year. Then design the plant for 30,000. We never sold more than 2,000 units in a year! But with typical Indian ingenuity, in the excess space created were squeezed production lines of existing products.

At the Frankfurt Motor Show in 1988 and saw a concept car of Nissan. What is the concept I asked? You will feel fresh after driving this car for 7 hours they said. At a time when only Maruti 800 had come to our shores, this idea seemed laughable. But after driving cars for 48 years I can tell you that this is a fandu idea. One can plot quality against the time one can drive without getting tired.

One of our key drawbacks is our not thinking things through before embarking on them. The Germans and Japanese are well known for the obverse. Intense discussion before. Smooth implementation and results thereafter. We on the other hand, jump in easily and then

struggle with realities. The Farm laws are a very good example. Demonetisation was in the same vein. But our businesses are no better. The mountain of NPAs coming from largely unrelated diversification projects, all adduce to this.

We spent 1988-89 in Frankfurt, where Sujata was doing her Post Doctoral work on a sabbatical and I was baby sitting our son. When we got back my boss asked me what I learnt. I said that I hoped that we did not remain poor, but we should not become rich because we lacked the social checks on individuals for them not to run amuck. We know how to live without disaffection, in poverty. But do we know how to be well off and not run amuck ? Thirty years on it is clear we do not. I take sad pride in this prescience. Culture matters.

One of the best books I have read to understand our country is “The Speaking Tree” by a British photographer who came in and out of India for 50 years. And his key point is that Indian society pivots around religion.

I am not religious in the conventional sense, but I understand that it is religion which is keeping our country relatively peaceful. Our true religion and not political versions of it. So, respect faith. Do not ridicule it, like the paper secularists do. Because we have no majority ethnic group, we have learnt over thousands of years to live and let live. This is a very valuable learning and cultural attribute. Europe and America are suffering from their inability to live with diversity. They lack the experience.

Often I start a talk on Indian society by pointing out that we are one of only two civilisations in the world to have such a cultural continuity. The other is China. Egypt is ancient but today's Egypt has nothing to do with the old Egypt. So, too with Iran or Iraq or Greece or Italy. This is why Iqbal said something to the effect that “there is something in us, that we can not be erased”. Anything that has lasted so long has to have something very strong going for it. What is it ?

This is why we have to turn to Bharat, understand it, become a part of it and then slowly change it. We have to modernise our tradition. But before this we must know our tradition. I was not really told of it, be it in the family or education. If anything we were being encouraged to discard it. It has taken me 40 years to discover it and act in tune with the best of it.

The best repositories of it is possibly in the Bhakti tradition. Each state probably has a patron saint. Kabir, Tukaram, Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, Basavanna, Tirukural. I recently discovered Akka Devi of Karnataka. Her Songs for Siva are a real treat. “What is a tree without shade, what is wealth without kindness...”

The other place where I learn from are our ruins. Ellora is a temple cut from a single rock. What quality work, to get everything right the first time. And it would be the work of a few generations, how was the concept and the skill transferred?

At the Ranakpur temple near Udaipur one glimpses another facet. On the pillars of this wonderful temple are figurines of the Sah, a merchant who was a minister, who funded the construction and the Sthapati who built it. The figurine of the sthapati is larger. The doer was considered bigger than the financier. Today ? We have Birla temples. Are Birlas gods ?

Cut, to Hampi near the scale of justice. On the grey green rocks are figurines of men, women, children looking in the same direction, their hands raised and folded. They are paying homage to the king. The king is one whom the people revere from the bottom of their hearts.

At Udaipur palace there are photographs of the king at the turn of the century, Fateh Singh. He was the only Indian king who did not attend the Dilli Durbar because he could not bow to anyone but god. In a spotless angarkha he is seen digging ponds, digging a well, carrying the palanquin of the god.

A decade ago I asked a Principal to leave because he thought he was a king, and a king does no work. This is our current colonial mindset at work. The king is one who works the most and takes his society forward. And in our society the fakir is rightly more revered than the king.

What we are now is a colonial society. Not a free, independent country. We have replaced the British with politicians and bureaucrats. We still have Collectors. Of what? In a newly independent Namibia in 1992 all their memorials were of the oppression by the colonial power. We were aghast to see them still there. But are we any different? Confucius said it is shameful to be rich in a poor country. Whenever I see a cavalcade of a politician my blood boils. Such brazen display of waste and inconvenience to the citizen off whom they live.

Sometime around 1994, we had a visitor. She was a Liberian lady working for the UN. Flying to Kathmandu she saw the 3-wheeler at Delhi and expressed a desire to find out more about it. We were explaining to her the buyer, how he is typically poor but financed by various financiers, largely government agencies. She leaned back and said, so, you are giving them a stake in the system. We had never seen it in that light. But it was an aha moment for me.

We are better off because we have chosen to give a stake in the system to all. Through public education, through reservation, through MSP. Others have not, so the poor have no stake in the system. In Namibia in 1992 there were roads on which you could drive at over 200kms/hour, but no public transport. If we do not want strife then we have to give every one a stake in the system.

So when an opportunity arose in 2009 to be responsible for a large essentially government aided higher education institution at Wardha I took it without hesitation. It was once a national institution, with an excellent DNA, like Shantiniketan, which had fallen into bad times due to neglect. Its average fees are Rs 2,000/- per year. Such institutions are low cost to the student but are high cost to the government. There are a multitude of these in the country but have become low quality due to bad managements and over protected and hence irresponsible teachers.

Sometime in 2005 a commercialiser of education, who is a Padma Shri, had stated brazenly at a CII event in Pune that only those with money should get educated. If this happens our country will burn.

So, the challenge was to improve their quality. And if we could do it, why not every one else. In some ways we have managed to achieve. 6 of the 8 institutions are now A grade from

being B grade. 2 have become autonomous. From 25, over 500 students get jobs at graduation. We do not advertise, yet have waiting lists for admissions. We moved to a single shift working which allows for more extra curricular activities and gets the place off from being a railway platform where people come and go. But its never too far from being a sisyphusian situation.

This was achieved shuttling every week, from Tuesday to Thursday, from Pune to Wardha via Nagpur by air for 10 years. And then having a punishing 7am to 9 pm workday in Wardha. Now, having shifted to Wardha in 2019 and having a staid 9-5 schedule, I wonder how I did it.

We started an engineering college at a time when they were closing, but received almost full admissions without advertising. Why ? Because technology, as Peter Thiel, a founder of Paypal says, technology is what takes us from zero to one. Without being in the technology space, one has no future. At a Seminar in Delhi last year on Industry Policy for Domestic Industry, speaker after speaker, warned of the hollowing out of Indian industry. There I came to know that many APIs (Active Pharmaceutical Ingredients) of our much vaunted pharma industry were coming from China.

Its a long shot, but our having an agriculture college and a science college and an engineering college, may in 10-20 years lead to some impactful outcomes. The direction in which one looks is a key part.

Tarlok Singh, who assisted Nehru, and was at the Planning Commission, narrates a very telling anecdote about the Economist Kaldor and Nehru. In the 50s we invited every major Economist in the world to help us fashion a plan. Even Milton Friedman, the guru of free markets, was invited. Kaldor kept asking Nehru in one way or another about what he would choose for the country. Hardship now and better times later or easy times now and less easy times later. Later Nehru asked Tarlok to never get the man again. Because Kaldor was asking the right question. We have been imagining, like Nehru, that there are easy choices to be made. It is when we take a hard look and be clear on what a better future demands and do it, that we stand a chance. Its the classic ant and the grass hopper story. We are grass hoppers. Who wants to be ant! Ironically, at the individual level, especially in low middle income houses, we are ants. But as a group!

We can see the future, only through a fog. But traverse the fog, we must.

Wardha is semi-urban or semi-rural whichever you prefer. A village is at best 10 minutes away. The average income of households our students come from, is the national average of less than Rs 10,000 per month. But because of its legacy of Gandhi, independence movement and Bajajs; and proximity to Nagpur, is still not provincial.

At Wardha one comes face to face with the independence movement. From Bapu Kutir, to Bajajwadi, to the spot in Gandhi chowk where a person was shot, to the numerous institutions set up then, even if now essentially in ruins. And one realises that pre-independence we were a free thinking, clear thinking people. The motto of our Nagpur Commerce College, established in 1945, is that lion hearted men create wealth. Is that how

we saw wealth creation post independence? Are our wealthy lion hearted? In 1915, someone donated Rs 15,000/- (Today's 15 Crs?) and asked it to be kept anonymous. Under British Raj we created private public institutions. What happened after independence?

Wardha, gave me the privilege of meeting with the then octogenarians who had seen pre-independence times. Like Justice Chandrashekhar Dharmadhikariji, Badjateji. They would regale us with stories of those times.

Since last year I have become responsible for CSR work in the district. Our focus is irrigation. By simply repairing/desilting canals and bandharas we are able to increase availability significantly. With a budget of Rs 10 crs a year, which is available to us, which is more than the discretionary spend with the Zilla Parishad, I believe we can take care of most pressing issues in the district, be it irrigation, infrastructure and quality in schools, all weather roads to farms. More than money what is needed is clarity of purpose and the resolve to deliver. We are also able to have a synergy between educational institutions and development of solutions. We are lucky that with our alumni base in the district, almost in every village and every government department, and credibility we get excellent cooperation. We do the work, but directly to achieve speed, quality, low cost and no corruption.

India's rural issues will not be resolved till we find a way to organise the choice, marketing and processing of our farm produce. Way back in 1945, Tarlok Singh, the ICS officer who resettled the farmers from Pakistan in the Punjab, wrote that the way forward could only be joint farming. That unfortunately will not work in our society. Cooperatives have come to be false gods. The private sector as of now has too many cheats, to be trusted. The farmers lack the organisational capability to run FPOs. As of now a FPO is a repackaged cooperative with in some ways even more onerous regulation. As of now I am not allowed to dabble in this, but sooner or later, I will have to.

I am a professional. Between 1979-95 I proudly wore that tag. Then exiting the corporate world I realised that in common parlance it meant a person who could be bought. So, I stopped calling myself one. I became an entrepreneur, even if a failed one. But everything happens because of professionals. They should have the competence, the delivery, the integrity. It was a farmer in Kurnool in 1982 who made me feel good to be one. He said, you have no axe to grind. In 1981 when I was in Lever's , an ex- Chief of the Army told me nonchalantly , as a parting shot, "make your pot". I did not understand him. How could making money be the aim of life. Money is an essential necessity, but can not be its purpose. Prakash Tandon, the first Indian head of Hindustan Lever, told us at an evening lecture in College in 1976, what did one need; a decent flat, a small car and money enough not to think about it. He is for me, the quintessential professional. Do read his "Punjabi Century" to learn a lot more. After Wardha, my pride in being a professional is back.

So from being an Indian I am now an honorary Bhartiya. Will remain an outsider to Bharat. But a part, howsoever small, of the solution. This post has become too long but I could not find a way to truncate it without leaving out something important or its (in)coherence. From now on this big picture will provide the setting for shorter pieces on more focused themes/issues that I believe deserve attention.

I know that the post is meandering, but as Jethro Tull said about one of their songs, “it is about everything”. This post will be the frame within which to go into later themes. Then I will not exceed 1,000 words. Thank you for your patience.

