How Liberalization impacts us

REFORMS

How Bollywood portrays them

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First Digital Edition 2021

Film Poster (Cover): *Dil Chahta Hai*
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engulfs the middle class due to three A's (availability, accessibility and acceptability) and two S's (social status and self-esteem). The distinction between salad bowl and melting pot remains, as it is fragmented.

Movies: *Dil Chahta Hai* (2001); *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara* (2011); *Hum Aapke Hai Kaun* (1994); *Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge* (1995); *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (1998)

Chapter 5: Hamari Sullu

No one has a fix on the size of the middle class, which ranges from 25 million to 700 million. It is "conceived, packaged and sold" to sellers and investors. The contentious comparisons: income versus wealth, and consumers versus aspirers/strivers.

Movies: *Swades* (2004); *Khosla Ka Ghosla* (2004); *Tumhari Sullu* (2017); *Gully Boy* (2019); *Mere Dad Ki Maruti* (2013); *Maska* (2020); *Fashion* (2008); *Gangoobai* (2013)

THE POOR

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The Magnificent Seven FMs, the passionate proselytizers wrongly claim that reforms help the have-nots more than the rich. The number of the poor remains high at 200-300 million. There are links between farmers' protests, MSPs, and exaggerated claims in the Budget speeches.

Movies: *Mother India* (1957); *Do Bheega Zameen* (1953); *Roti* (1974); *Upkaar* (1967); *Guide* (1965); *Manthan* (1976); *Project Marathwada* (2016); *Peepli Live* (2010); *Kisaan* (2009); *Matru Ki Bijlee Ka Mandola* (2013); *Udta Punjab* (2016)

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The jobs conundrum – how to reconcile the two trends that there are more jobs due to the invisible hand, as also eras of no-jobs and less-jobs. There are other contradictions – mysterious case of vanishing women labor, and women empowerment due to MNREGA.

Movies: *Sonali Cable* (2014); *Jab We Met* (2007); *Queen* (2014); *99.9 FM* (2005); *Dev D* (2009)

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Huge MSD doses are injected into cricket and its administration. The game is commercialized. Telecast rights attract billions of dollars. The dressing room changes as players hail from small states and towns.

Movies: *Lagaan: Once Upon A Time In India* (2001); *Chak De! India* (2007); *MS Dhoni: The Untold Story* (2016); *22 Yards* (2018)

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Inflows of dollars, digitization, and decimation of underworld's businesses boost betting and match fixing. Gambling is mafia's new manna due to the opening up of the economy. Mumbai blasts and terror aid the trend.

Movies: *Jannat* (2008); *Azhar* (2016); *Iqbal* (2005)

THE FINANCE

Chapter 10: EMIs ki Pagalpanti
The credit culture, mindset to 'buy now, pay later', and 'spend someone else's money' liberates and strangulates us. We become risk takers as we take our chances, and bet our lives on the stock roulette.

Movies: *EMI* (2008); *Desi Boyz* (2011); *Saare Jahaan Se Mehnga* (2013); *Home Delivery* (2005); *Pagalpanti* (2019)

Chapter 11: The Baazaar after Scam 92
Reforms abet stock scandals. Big bulls like Harshad Mehta and Ketan Parekh become heroes, and nosedive in disgrace. The regulators doze off, and policy makers hope to prop up the market.

Movies: *Baazaar* (2018); *Gafla* (2006); *Scam 92* (2020)

THE SOCIETY

Chapter 12: What Is Mobile Number?
As the mobile, Internet, and digital culture afflicts us, we are both freer and slaves to technology. Our lives turn topsy-turvy as we grapple with virtual connectivity, as opposed to physical interactions.

Movies: *Haseena Maan Jayegi* (1999); *3G* (2013); *Ragini MMS* (2011); *Rajma Chawal* (2018); *Hacked* (2020); *Mickey Virus* (2013); *Kalyug* (2005); *Teen Patti* (2010); *Table No. 21* (2013); *Sabki Band Bajegi* (2015); *Tashan* (2008); *Green Card Fever* (2003); *Hello* (2008); *Ek Chalis Ki Last Local* (2007)

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Liberalization unleashes forces that improve and destroy the education system. It forces people to focus on exams to succeed in the dog-eat-dog corporate world. It disconnects us from nature and environment.

Movies: *3 Idiots* (2009); *FALTU* (2011); *Hindi Medium* (2017); *Why Cheat India* (2019); *Munna Bhai MBBS* (2003); Waiting (2015); *Aisa Yeh Jahaan* (2015); *Zor Laga Ke… Haiya* (2009); *Blackboard vs Whiteboard* (2019)

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Corruption grows with higher economic growth, and ease of doing business enhances the ease of earning illegal profits. Fissures in mafias and rise in regional political parties shift rent collection from the Center to states, and from the districts to state capitals.

Movies: *Company* (2002); *Satya* (1998); *Ab Tak Chappan* (2004); *Mumbhai Connection* (2014); *The Accidental Prime Minister* (2019); *Apharan* (2005)

Chapter 15: Oye Lucky Lucky Oye!
We are conmen in our own ways. This is true of the rich and middle classes. We are hypocrites, and have double standards when we judge ourselves and others. We blame the better-off socio-economic classes.

Movies: *Bunty Aur Babli* (2005); *Oye Lucky Lucky Oye!* (2008)

Chapter 16: New Money-Go-Rounds
Domestic black money goes out and, instead of being hidden in tax havens, makes round trips back to India. The judiciary sticks to laws, which are made by those who remain unruffled. It's a trippy experience.

Movies: *Gupt* (1997); *Deewaar* (1975); *Don* (1978)

To the friend, who made me realize the beauty of Delhi's sunsets, pleasure of dancing the salsa with two left feet, and a way to re-read A Suitable Boy

About the Author

With more than three decades of experience as an investigative business journalist, Alam Srinivas explores the nexus between Big Government and Big Business, and exposes the underbelly of economic reforms. He has worked with prestigious media organizations such as the *Times of India*, *India Today*, *Outlook*, *San Jose Mercury News*, and www.bbc.com. He is an author of several books, appears as an expert on news channels and radio, and gives lectures in colleges and B-Schools.

Other books by Alam Srinivas

Ambani Vs Ambani: Storms in the Sea Wind
The Indian Consumer
IPL: Cricket & Commerce
Cricket Czars: Two men who changed the gentleman's game
Women of Vision

CHAPTER 1

MADE IN CHINA MAKE IN INDIA

How wealth is no longer a dirty word and its pursuit is endemic. The contours of money are ephemeral and fleeting, as they are based on paper (stock) valuations. There are changes in the poster boys of India Inc.

Movies: *Raid* (2018); *Rocket Singh: Salesman of the Year* (2009); *Guru* (2007); *Sui Dhaaga* (2018); *Made In China* (2019); *Corporate* (2006)

IMAGINE

an honest and conscientious civil servant, the income tax officer, Amay Patnaik. Of course, regular transfers are a part of his job, and he finds himself in Lucknow. He gets an anonymous, but actionable, tip. The 'Don of Sitagarh', the powerful MP, Rameshwar Singh, has stashed untaxed wealth worth billions of rupees at his palatial house. Amay raids the place. This leads to a cat-and-mouse game in this 2018 Bollywood movie, *Raid*.

Yet another tip – a map with the locations of the hidden hoard – and an unrelated remark by Rameshwar's mother leads to the hudden treasure. It is found in the form of gold coins and bars, statues, and cash, and it is concealed in the building's pillars, walls, ceilings, and floors. The rest of the plot of the flick (Ajay Devgn as Amay, and Saurabh Shukla as Rameshwar) isn't important. It has the usual twists and turns – the officer is transferred, yet again, and the MP is jailed.

Set in the 1980s, and based on a true event, the film provides a perfect setting to understand what transpired in the next decade. What is important is the realization that until the 1980s, India's illegal wealth was invisible. It was buried inside concrete structures or stored in huge jute bags in warehouses. It remained unseen in the form of untraceable *benami* assets, or in someone else's accounts. It vanished into foreign bank accounts in tax havens.

There was the obvious blame game. The wealthy felt that the tax rates were so high that only the stupid would disclose their profits. The anti-rich lobby thought that the business community was unscrupulous, and only wished to evade taxes. Corruption was endemic, expansive, and pervasive. No one knew who owned what, and where. The figures were so secret that even the global lists of the rich and famous, like the ones by *Fortune* and *Forbes* magazines, did not include Indians.

No Indian or non-resident Indian (NRI) found a mention in *Fortune*'s annual list (1990) of dollar-billionaires. Ironic as it may sound, it still hinted that they did amass undisclosed wealth. One of the global tycoons mentioned in the list was Sheikh Rashid bin Said al Maktoum, the ruler of UAE, a nation which "imports some 25% of all newly-minted gold, subsequently smuggling much of it into India for use as (marriage) dowries". India was still a bird of gold, but most of the shiny metal lay unseen.

Remember the stack of the yellow metal Amay found at Rameshwar's house. In those days, India was, and still is, the largest consumer of gold, most of which is stockpiled in the houses and vaults of the rich and poor, and temples and other places of worship. But, apart from bullion, Indians became more open in the disclosure of their wealth, especially in stocks and financial assets, in the post-liberalized world. By the mid-1990s, the *Forbes* annual list of dollar-billionaires included three Indians.

The trio, as expected, belonged to the brick-and-mortar world. The united Ambani family had huge interests in petrochemicals and texttiles; Kumar Mangalam Birla was the new miner-kid on the block, and; NRI Lakshmi Mittal was known for 'steely' takeovers. By 1999, three became seven. The new fearsome-foursome included two IT Tsars – Wipro's Azim Premji and HCL's Shiv Nadar. Indians began to follow western capitalist commandments.

Many of the business families crumbled, and a few vanished, in the 1990s. Post-reforms, it was the survival of the fittest, not the first

One of the most important edicts related to competition, or Corporate Darwinism. Until the 1980s, Indian business families thrived in the socialist, protected and restricted Licence-Permit-Quota Raj, a form of crony socialism based on favours given to, and taken from, the political rulers. Control over licences, finance, and technology created mini-monopolies. Many of these business houses crumbled in the 1990s. In the post-reforms era, it was the survival of the fittest, not the first.

Hence, several business families – Modi and Dalmia in the north, Sarabhai and Mafatlal in the west, and TVS and MAC in the south – were not on the *Forbes*' lists during the 1990s. In the first decade or two after reforms, older business owners lost out to the Indian newcomers and foreign MNCs.

Incumbents and new entrants battled among themselves. The wars began in the 1980s, and reached their peaks in the 1990s. For example, the American Pepsi took on Ramesh 'Parle' Chauhan, who later fell into the laps of Pepsi's renowned competitor, Coke. Finally, the Indian market witnessed no-holds-barred battles between the two MNC soft drinks makers. A sideshow was the clash for potato wafers – between brands owned by Pepsi, and those launched by local entrepreneurs.

The movie that captured it in reel form was *Mantra* (Word that implies a chant with special spiritual power; 2016). Its late release was a sign from the skies. The film was an attempt at crowd-funding, a concept that was alien in the 1980s, i.e. in the pre-liberalized world. Kapil Kapoor owns King Chips, a local potato wafer brand. But he is on the verge of bankruptcy as he vainly strives to compete with MNC rival, Kipper. King Chips was akin to the real-life Uncle Chipps, which sold out to American Frito-Lay in 2000.

But even as the business families suffered, first-generation players like HCL's Nadar succeeded. Unwittingly, his graph was similar to the protagonist of *Rocket Singh: Salesman of the Year*, a movie released in 2009. Both signalled how Indians surfed stormy waves on the entrepreneurial coast. Like Harpreet 'Rocket' Singh Bedi, Nadar was a master-salesman and co-founder of HCL which, in the 1980s, was known to sell ice to the Eskimos.

Weird as it may seem, both Rocket and Nadar were a part of computer hardware firms – the former as an employee, and the latter as a part-owner. It was in the 1980s that HCL used 'unusual' methods to sell computers, especially to government departments. Rocket finds himself in the midst of an organization, which resorts to unsavory methods. It forces him to reboot his professional life, and launch his venture.

In the late 1980s, a few years before reforms accelerated, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi eased imports, and re-emphasized screwdriver technology, i.e. assembly of goods. Both led to an onslaught of foreign brands, and local ones with foreign components. A sizeable sales-and-marketing force developed across the nation to sell these hitherto-unavailable products. Many of these salesmen and marketers became India's next-gen entrepreneurs.

Rocket Singh is a movie character that portrays such new faces. However, by the time the film was released, Nadar had made a transition, and entered the software arena. As the world was agitated, perturbed, and disturbed about computers crashing at the stroke of the new millennium, when their inbuilt clocks couldn't change to Year 2000 (from 1900s), India emerged as the hub to deal with the virtual bug (virus).

This brings us to the second capitalist commandment that Indians imbibed. Money wasn't created only in the physical world of manufacturing. Virtual was as real. The new dollar-billionaires worked in binaries of 1 and 0, as did wealth, which multiplied in multiples of millions. HCL shifted from hardware-assembler to software, Azim Premji's Wipro changed the gears from soaps to software, and he too became a billionaire.

Wealth, as the rich realized, was as ephemeral as the sectors they operated in. In *Raid*, Amay and Rameshwar dealt in cash and gold. From 1991 onwards, the super-rich pinned their hopes on the valuations of the shares they owned. The worth of the stocks randomly soared and nosedived. Since prices fluctuated on daily basis, so did the wealth of the businesspersons.

Let us consider an example, which proves how fleeting the feeling of being rich is. In 2005, the two Ambani brothers, elder Mukesh and Anil, together were worth $7 billion. This was before they split after a public spat. By 2008, or before the Global Financial Crisis, the *Forbes* list estimated their combined wealth at a jaw-dropping $85 billion – $43 billion for Mukesh and $42 billion for Anil. Such a sharp surge, almost 12 times, was strange. So were the times.

Over the next decade, despite a sharp fall, Mukesh retained his worth, which was estimated at $40 billion in 2018. The same year, Anil's tanked to $2.7 billion. In 2020, the younger brother told a London court that he was bankrupt, "The current value of my shareholding is down to $82.4 million (not billion), and my net worth is zero after taking into account my liabilities." Mukesh's wealth re-reached heroic heights; it was $84.3 billion at 9 pm on June 23, 2021.

We can be precise about the time, date and Mukesh's worth. As billions of dollars are wiped out in a matter of minutes and hours, when stocks tumble by 5-10%, *Forbes* has a real-time list of dollar-billionaires. It captures the regular changes in net worth. In case you miss out, the website lists out daily losers and winners – which reflect the ranking "since 5 PM EST of prior trading day".

The movie, Guru, shows how businesses grew in the 1970s and 1980s. It holds deep insights into wealth creation in the post-reforms era

But by the turn of the century, wealth was celebrated in India, as was the case in other capitalist societies. The rich weren't cagey to show off, and some went over the top to spend money and openly dislose the details of their crass expenses. This didn't mean the rich had nothing to hide – the ill-gotten money remained. It only implied that they earned enough legit profits, thanks to lower taxes and business freedom. The black money was still hidden, and in the same or higher quantums as before.

One of the Hindi films which places the Goddess of Lakshmi on the earthly pedestal – and profits and greed as the human salvation – is *Guru* (Super-Teacher; 2007). Based on the life of the late Dhirubhai Ambani – it was privately screened for the family before the public release – it portrays how businessmen grew during the 1970s and 1980s. However, it holds deep insights on how legal wealth was created in the post-reforms era.

Guru Bhai (Abhishek Bachchan) is an eclectic character. Most businesspersons are, but are never projected in this manner. As a teenager, he runs odd businesses to earn extra bucks. When he goes abroad to work, he, like a typical youngster, is interested in wine, women, and wealth. In case we forget, he is audaciously ambitious. Everyone knows the legend, probably apocryphal, about Dhirubhai – he wanted to build the world's largest refinery.

Since Guru Bhai has to survive – sorry, thrive – in socialist India, he twists and tweaks existing rules and laws. The reason: the government directives favor the incumbents, i.e. business groups that corner licences, permits, quotas, finance, technology, and foreign collaborations. A newcomer is stopped at the gates of the High Castle – the entry barriers are high. The dice is loaded against people like Guru Bhai, who have to either gate-crash or pole vault over the high walls to enter the lavish palaces.

Here's how Arun Shourie, an ex-minister and former enemy of Dhirubhai, adulated the businessman. In 2003, the former batted for the Ambani patriarch, who earlier was viciously and violently attacked by Shourie's newspaper, *Indian Express*, in the 1980s. The former editor-minister simplistically – and possibly wrongly – said that what Dhirubhai did was to exceed his licensing capacities, or produce more than the official limits. He slashed through the licences and permits.

Shourie added that most argue that these restrictions should not have been there. The government had no business to impose them. "And that the Dhirubhais are to be thanked, not once but twice over: they set up world class companies and facilities in spite of those regulations", he clarified. He added that by going against the laws – and capacity limits – Dhirubhai "helped create the case for scrapping these regulations". He and others opened the vents for the strong breeze of liberalization. (https://www.rediff.com/money/2003/aug/11paran.htm)

In a 2001 column, Shekhar Gupta went overboard to support Dhirubhai. He wrote that after a decade of reforms, India did not respect wealth creators, and held them with suspicion and contempt. "Whatever scams the Ambanis may have been involved in, they have built real wealth, and our system cannot stomach that. It has worked... (only) to find out what they have done wrong, what laws they have twisted, which levers they have turned to build these world-class assets."

But it was wrong to go after the wealth generators, even if they acquired it by dubious means. As Gupta puts it, one has to question how first-generation owners came so far "without... going to the jail once". According to him, India's tragedy was not that it had one Dhirubhai, but that it did not produce a couple more. If India had done it, Dhirubhai himself would have had to compete with the others. (http://archive.indianexpress.com/res/web/pIe/columnists/shek/20010901.html)

Of course, such arguments are ridiculous. Shourie wants us to break laws. He is not bothered about whether there are socialist controls, or liberalized ones. The overriding objective: go against the laws. Gupta contends that as long as the law-breaker produces wealth, and does not go to prison, it doesn't matter. The check on the producers comes via the market. Well, just to be controversial, Dawood was never arrested.

Guru Bhai straddles two economic eras – he breaks the barriers of the 1980s. He becomes bigger in the 1990s, thanks to business freedom and flexibility. Thus, he epitomizes the new businessperson, whose goal is primarily to create wealth and earn profits through world-class factories. The means justify the end, i.e. earn supernormal cash. Greed is good, as the protagonist Gordon Gekko says in Hollywood's *Wall Street*.

Gupta wrote too soon. In this century – rather, in the past two decades – several Dhirubhais appeared out of nowhere. Some flounced and flopped; others bounced and bumped with partial triumphs. However, a few became better and bigger at gaming the game. In his time, Dhirubhai changed the rules of the game. His followers changed the game.

Hence, new wealth creators joined the dollar-billionaire list. A few younger members of the older families were able to reclaim lost glory. They fought back, and clawed their ways to re-earn wealth. They found transient and permanent places on the *Forbes* list. These included Rahul Bajaj and Anand Mahindra. The flash in the pans – the ones who came, saw, rose and vamoosed – were Vijay Mallya, Gautam Thapar, BK Modi, and the Dalmia duo (Jai Hari and Yadu Hari).

Obviously, the list included first-gen entrepreneurs. There were professionals, who quit jobs to launch businesses. Of the seven co-founders of Infosys, five – NR Narayana Murthy, Nandan Nilekani, S Gopalakrishnan, K Dinesh, and SD Shibulal – were collectively worth $8.6 billion in 2020. And the fiery five remained on the *Forbes* annual lists for decades.

A few were small-time traders and self-employed people, whose fortunes zoomed in the post-reforms era. Zee Group's Subhash Chandra was a pioneer in TV broadcast and cable distribution in the 1990s. He made his initial obscene profits through questionable exports to Russia. Videocon Group's Dhoot family too used the old Communist trade route to become a major player in electronics and power. Micky Jagtiani, the London-based NRI cab driver, became the retail king in the Middle-East.

It is evident from the sectors in which these rich individuals made their names that reforms proved to be the key ingredient. As governments opened up new areas for private entry, as licensing limits vanished, entrepreneurship blossomed. Competition was excessive, so were the opportunities. In telecom, Sunil Bharti Mittal came on top. In aviation, Naresh Goyal's Jet Airways took off, but later went bankrupt and crashed.

Gautm Adani was one of the most fortunate ones, especially in the last decade or so. He walked brazenly, and with aplomb, into ports, power, airports, and other sunrise areas. His growth was one of the fastest, comparable only to Mukesh Ambani, who maintained a stranglehold in telecom, e-commerce, oil-and-gas, and petrochemicals. Feudal lords in infrastructure, like GM Rao and GVK Reddy, rose like phoenix from the ashes, and then went up in smoke within a few years.

The fear of the millennium bug forced westerners to depend on Indians to fix their computer clocks, so that they could recognize year 2000

In the recent past, digital entrepreneurs stole the show. They bulled their way into the billionaires' party, even as they built brands to take on global competitors. The two unrelated Bansals of Flipkart, an e-commerce player, got overseas funding, even as they kept Amazon at e-bay. Byju Raveendaran, a former teacher and son of teacher-parents, found more than 10 million students for online classes.

Among the sectors that opened the doors for the new billionaires, software was the most visible. After the fear of the millennium bug forced westerners to depend on Indians to fix their computer clocks, dozens of software sovereigns emerged in the 2000s. This was especially after on-shoring – Indians working at clients' sites – gave way to off-shoring (after the tech stock crash in 2000), and outsourcing.

Pharmaceuticals Pharaohs took advantage of reverse engineering – ripping apart an expensive drug to study its chemistry – to become large exporters. Later, they build their future in generics, or drugs that went off-patent, where the first-movers had exclusive marketing rights for a brief period. At the same time, these drug barons did some R&D to discover new molecules, and cheaper options to manufacture medicines sold by the global MNCs.

Over a few decades, Indian companies and brands became world-recognized names. They initiated worldwide takeovers, whose staggering amounts shocked their global competitors. In a reverse imperialism of sorts, Ratan Tata acquired British auto brands, Jaguar and Land Rover. Anil Agarwal and

KM Birla successfully scouted for mining assets across the world. The world became India's oyster.

Indian brands became bigger, and captured international markets. Hero Group emerged as the world leader in cycles and motorcycles. Symphony, an air-cooler brand owned by Achal Bakeri, became the largest selling global brand. It is ironic that Bakeri went broke when he diversified; he fought back and emerged triumphant when he stuck with air-coolers.

Within the country, domestic brands fended off the MNCs' challenges. The former comprehensively defeated the latter at their games. These included older names, which faltered, and regained lost grounds – Dabur and Nirma. New brands cropped up, and controlled sizeable share of the local markets – Havells, *Ghari*, and Patanjali. The makers of these products surely and aggressively joined the top wealth creators' lists.

Several flicks captured the stories of such individuals and trends. *Sui Dhaaga* (Needle-Thread; 2018) featured the essence of ideas, innovation and industry. When Mamta (Anushka Sharma) finds out how her husband, Mauji, (Varun Dhawan), is treated at work, she forces him to start his venture. The husband's tailoring skills re-marry the spouse's embroidery dexterity to create new designs. *Sui Dhaaga* becomes a global brand, and the movie culminates in a scene when Mauji's father walks the ramp.

A review in *Filmfare* noted, "For years, we have been hearing the refrain that the youth should turn away from seeking jobs and concentrate on being entrepreneurs.... Another thing we are hearing is that we should go back to our handicrafts and invest in their uniqueness. *Sui Dhaaga* combines both these features and makes a strong case for self-empowerment without being preachy about it."

What is heart-rending in the movie is a series of dialogues, which displays the emotions of Indians. Although a bit exaggerated, it shows the urge to follow China's example. A character in the movie asks why they stamp their goods as 'Made in China'. The reply, followed by derisive laughter: who will buy them if they are marked 'Made in Ghaziabad'.

This lack of confidence and inability to accept that the India label can be marketed globally comes out succinctly when Mauji and Mamta debate on what to call their brand. The clincher is simple. Mamta tells her husband, "*Apni banayi hui cheez pe apni mor likh kar bechenge* (We will sell the goods we make as our own brand)." In recent times, Indians gained the confidence to compete with China.

However, the beauty of *Sui Dhaaga* is that it hints at business churns –

sometimes positive, as in this film, and sometimes negative, or a mix of positive-negative, that reforms unleashed. The roiling was creative and destructive. No business escaped from its agitating effects. There were pressures, changes, and issues to grapple with. Some businesses managed to deal with them; others faltered.

The China versus India tussle, and Indians' zeal to ape the Dragon Nation, became the underlying theme in *Made In China* (2019). A review in *News18* said that the protagonist Raghuvir Mehta (Rajkummar Rao) was "struggling to get a business off the ground... any business, actually. He's tried everything, from selling Emu eggs and square-shaped watermelons, to dodgy *roti*-makers and Nepali carpets. None have taken off sadly...."

A trip to China with a condescending cousin, chance meeting with a market-savvy Gujarati businessman, and an encounter with a Chinese entrepreneur convinces Raghuvir of a unique business idea. He markets a Chinese aphrodisiac, which is ten times stronger than Viagra. To grab the Indian clientele, he teams up with a 70-year-old sexologist.

His success leads to a diplomatic disaster, and a murder. A review in NDTV explained, "A Chinese dignitary attending a 'Glorious Gujarat' summit in Ahmedabad drinks a sex potion. The stimulant boomerangs. He drops dead. A diplomatic crisis looms. Two CBI men fly in to investigate the mishap. The lethal tiger soup (aphrodisiac), it transpires, originated in China." Raghuvir, who sells this and similar drugs, is high on the investigators' suspect list.

Other scenes show how Indians are both envious – given that Chinese products have grabbed global market shares – and disdainful, as they bear the belief that Chinese products are inferior. As the NDTV review maintained, one of the characters pointed out at the weird ironies of life – Chinese quality, Chinese casualty. This highlights the macabre belief about 'Made in China'. But, at the same time, Raghuvir's Chinese product is better than Viagra.

The strains and stress in business models, which were inculcated due to reforms, find references in the movie, *Corporate* (2006). It deals with increased competition and business rivalries, the entry of foreign players, and freedom that the states got from the Center to woo investments. There are other related trends like disinvestment, or sale of state-owned units. The fortunes of Indians fluctuated due to these reasons, even as many became billionaires.

Marwah Group (head: Raj Babbar) and Sehgal Group (patriarch: Rajat Kapoor) tussle for market shares in a bid to expand their sprawling empires. New opportunities mingle with intrigues and unethical moves, as both bid to grow at each other's expense. The central finance minister helps Sehgal to ink a deal with a global food MNC. Marwah grabs a PSU that is up for sale with the support of the state's finance minister.

Finally, there is a scramble between the groups. Marwah misleads the media that he will launch a mineral water brand. Sehgal uses corporate espionage in the rawest form – sexual links between his and Marwah's employees – to ferret out the secret that it is a mint-flavor drink. A few days before the drink hits the market, the plot moves in and out of Bollywood situations.

The film talks about the seamier side of business. Corporate corruption in the post-liberalization phase requires a larger narrative, which will come later. Here, it is sufficient to say that the one of the characters in the movie, Ritesh (Kay Kay Menon), who threatens to become a whistle-blower, dies. Nishi (Bipasha Basu), Sehgal's secret weapon, lands in jail, and fights the court case for years. Marwah and Sehgal live happily thereafter.

CHAPTER 2

UPSTARTS AND PAD MAN

The rise of Professional-Entrepreneur or Brahmin Businesspersons. Knowledge is the key, as entrepreneurship becomes pervasive and democratized. The class and caste divide remains.

Movies: *Pad Man* (2018); *Pyaar Impossible* (2010); *Upstarts* (2019)

MY late father's journey typified those of many professionals between the 1950s and 1980s. He was the first from his village to venture out to study in a college. After his mechanical engineering from Benares Hindu University, he joined a private firm owned by a reputed business family. He retired from there, after working in several Indian cities in the south, east, and north, and making numerous international business trips.

He was happy with one job. He was comfortable with his salary, and did not desire more. He purchased an apartment, and bought us toy cars and Parker pens from the allowances he got during the overseas trips. An owner of a scooter for most of his life, he purchased a car late in life. The four-wheeler was used occasionally, on weekends, once or twice a month. He washed and polished it every Sunday, and covered it with a tarpaulin.

He wanted the children to follow the same path. Did they? The four kids, three sons and a daughter, studied in reputed schools. The daughter, the eldest, is a post-graduate, who was a joint-earner for years after her marriage. The eldest son joined the army, but died in an accident. The second son joined engineering, gave up in the middle, and is a self-employed consultant. The youngest winged his way to the US, and runs a single-person software firm.

In their respective ways, the three children own (or owned) assets such as properties, home appliances and conveniences, and cars. They spend on entertainment and pleasures. The families eat out, go to pubs, and enjoy the latest mobiles, if they can. They are brand conscious, and think of themselves as upper (or, is it, uppity) middle class. They are not rich or wealthy, but are at a level at which they earn decently, work professionally, spend conveniently, and have urban lifestyles. My mother, a retired home-maker, enjoys Lays potato chips, and McCain frozen french fries.

Within a generation, as is the case with our family, urban India underwent a deep stir. The pursuit of wealth was acceptable, even commendable. Being in business was neither abhorred nor disdained. The safety of a stable job was not the ultimate aspiration. The mix of ambition, greed, and desires was fine. There was nothing wrong in owning assets, even if it meant multiple houses.

However, there is a thread that connected the two generations. Education was the vehicle, which allowed them to pursue wealth. In my father's case, it enabled him to move from the village to city. Reforms opened ways to use knowledge to start businesses. This was true for sunrise areas such as software, pharmaceutical, retail, and Internet, and the old ones too. Professionals started companies, which was the preserve of the merchant-traders.

Experts dubbed this phenomenon as the rise of 'Brahmin Businessmen'. It signalled the ascent of 'Middle-Class Businesspersons', or the rise of a 'Middle Class of Entrepreneurs'. They had common traits – hailed from professional, middle-class families, educated and urbane, belonged mostly to the upper castes (not just the Brahmins), and had peculiar socio-economic qualities. Most had no background in business, and many studied abroad, or in elite Indian institutions.

The end result was that entrepreneurship was democratized; the urge to run a business was pervasive. In both cities and towns, people wished to do something on their own. The Amway Global Entrepreneurship Report (2018) said that 91% of the surveyed Indians held the "desire" to start a venture, and 74% felt that they had the skills to do so. Almost four-fifths exuded that neither their families nor friends could "dissuade" them.

In the 2018 Amway survey, 95% people said that education was a "critical success factor" to ensure entry into businesses in the post-reforms era

When the report combined three factors – desire, confidence, and persistence – India ranked No. 2, behind Vietnam, in the 'Entrepreneurial Spirit Index'. It was ahead of the US, China, Brazil, and the UK. An earlier report (2008) by the National Knowledge Commission found that while two-thirds of the surveyed people were first-generation businesspersons, 99% of them never wanted regular jobs.

An overwhelming majority (95%) in the Amway report was categorical that education was a "critical success factor", and half of them were convinced that studies provided the "key trigger to evoke entrepreneurial inclinations". Education, which earlier pushed people like my father to seek stable jobs, became the ladder to reach the pinnacle of wealth creation.

Kapil (Priyanshu Painyuli) epitomizes the 'Brahmin Businessman' in the movie, *Upstarts* (2019). A review on *First Post* said that his character "encompasses the spirit of every fresher graduate, bitten by the start-up bug, who identifies a path-breaking business opportunity in the direst of situations". Another analysis on *News18* said that Kapil had a "knack of looking for entrepreneurial ideas in day-to-day conversations and scenarios".

He is the quintessential start-up founder.

In the opening scenes, Kapil and Yash (Chandrachoor Rai) hatch a plan to help their friend, Vinay (Shadab Kamal), to elope with his girlfriend. When it fails, Kapil has a brainwave – why not a start-up to help runaway couples? The other two laugh it off. But another thought strikes Kapil – when a man dies in his arms because a clinic in a village did not have life-saving medicines.

What emerges from this life-changing experience is CarryKaro, a mobile app that allows villagers to access crucial medicines. Another social entrepreneur, Jaya (Sheetal Thakur), runs an app to deal with people with suicidal tendencies. As Kapil, his two friends, and an angel investor struggle with the contradictory aims of profits and altruism, the *Times of India* said that Jaya gives Kapil "a reality check every time he has a hard time finding a balance between his mind and heart".

In *Pyaar Impossible* (Love Impossible; 2010), Abhay (Uday Chopra), a shy, awkward and nerdy geek student, falls in love with Alisha (Priyanka Chopra). But the feelings lie unrevealed. Seven years later, he invents a software that integrates operating systems – unlike Microsoft and Apple – and seeks an investor. The latter steals the software, and hawks it. When the inventor finds out, he searches for the investor to force a confrontation, and re-meets Alisha.

Alisha is divorced with a daughter. She mistakes Abhay for a nanny. Abhay finds out that the thief-investor has sold the software to the company where she works. At the software's launch, Abhay is exposed as Alisha's stalker. But when Alisha finds out the truth, she and Abhay rush to stop the launch. The climax: only Abhay knows the password to unlock the software – it's Alisha.

Coincidentally, in Sanskrit, Alisha means "protected by God". For centuries, the Brahmins, who avowed special protection of Gods, along with other upper castes, used learning as an easy and steady route to prosperity. With their stranglehold over religious texts, and knowledge about governance, they were in demand among Emperors and Kings. The Brahmins acquired class and status, money and property.

During the colonial rule, education became crucial for the British for other reasons. The rulers realized that because of their small numbers, they needed the support of Indians, who were loyal and knew the ways of the westerners. In 1835, a British civil servant, Thomas Macaulay, wrote that there was a need to form a class of local administrators, "a class of persons, Indian in blood and color, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect".

One of the ways to achieve this goal was through English education. Apart from Christian missionaries, the British set up elite schools and colleges; they encouraged Indians to travel to British universities. Only the elite and upper castes, who had money and means, took advantage of these opportunities. A small minority of lower castes benefitted after the Madras Presidency introduced reservation in colleges.

Post-Independence, as India built the temples of modern India, and focused on industrialization, educated personnel were critical. New institutes of higher education, like IITs, sprung up, even as reservation got a fillip, especially in south India. By the 1990s, lower-caste quotas in Tamil Nadu, former Andhra Pradesh, and Karnataka were 60-70%. Education was accessible to the creamier layers of the lower castes.

However, until the 1990s, education was believed to be the panacea to grab cushy jobs. The literate could have basic conveniences – and some more, like slots in better schools and colleges for children. This state-of-mind changed, and was driven by a combination of reforms in India and tech boom in the Silicon Valley. By then, thousands of Indians either worked as software engineers, or studied in the US.

The opening up of the sunrise sectors enabled people to scout for business breaks – as large producers and service providers, or as small- and medium-size vendors. If you knew the nuances of a sector, you were better off running your own concern, rather than seek a job. Since running an enterprise wasn't an anathema anymore, many explored the new possibilities.

In the Silicon Valley, the start-up infection turned into a pandemic in the 1990s. Everyone wanted to become a founder. There was a feeling that if one had a good idea, there was enough money sloshing around to fund it. Most of these ventures were based on the Internet and digital connectivity. Young Indians, who worked in Silicon Valley, were victims of the start-up plague.

Such dreamers had icons to follow. By then, Indians had launched software empires to deal with the millennium bug. Hence, the Narayana Murthys and Shiv Nadars could be emulated. Most of the pioneers and followers were either from the elitist families or upper castes. There were a few from the lower castes, but they were from the upper layers of these segments, and their families had access to global prospects.

When I was in the US in 1999-2000, I saw hundreds of aspirants. They swarmed across the Valley, and worked in software and tech companies. A friend had just quit his job in Cisco, and was on a search for an angel investor. On a Sunday morning, he took me to a fund-seeking meeting that was held in the lobby of Marriott Hotel. It attracted individuals like my friend, who had ideas, and those who had the money. I saw dozens with their laptops.

The ones with ideas sat on the floor, stood hunched on their knees, and tried to interest potential investors with their PPTs. Each one felt she had the next big idea to revolutionize Internet. Not everyone's was a first-time pitch. There were scores who had done this before, sold their earlier start-ups for huge valuations, and now sought investments for their second or third idea. Each one brimmed with a smile, zeal, enthusiasm and confidence.

Each potential founder felt that her brainchild could be taken to the next level, and turned into another Intel, Microsoft or Cisco. They thought that they were the next breed of tech billionaires, who could make more money for the venture capitalists. The VCs had gone beyond ideas. They wanted a mature and evolved partner-entrepreneur.

Another day, my friend drove past a hillock with huge mansions. "This is the 'Millionaire Hill'. Several Indians, who made money through start-ups, and funding of ventures, live here. This is my Mecca. One day, I will live here," he exudes. I could see the stars in his start-up eyes, which were twisted into the shape of greenbacks. His heart heaved, and mind swirled in anticipation.

He took me to a paid New Year's Eve party. There were hundreds of people. Men and women, young and old, almost all of them Indians, rubbed and scrubbed shoulders, as I found it difficult to move through the crowd. The energy was lightning-like, the conversations were unbelievable. Everyone talked money. It was about what they had launched or funded, and the wealth they had made. Everything went green after a few drinks.

The following are the typical conversations I had or heard that night.

"I have sold two, and the last one for $100 million. I am on my third, and this may get a funding of $250 million, and sell for $500 million."

"I am on my way. The funding for the idea is almost done. There is $50 million in the first phase and more if I deliver."

"No, I no longer live there. I sold it, and brought a bigger place for $10 million. This is a posh place."

"I and my friends quit our jobs. We had an excellent discussion with a VC the other day. The money will be in. The next year will be exciting."

Such words were heady, to say the least. They were weird too. This was the night of December 31, 1999. Even as the adrenalin ran among the founders and funders, there was the FOMO factor. For, by this time, everyone instinctively knew that the tech boom in the Valley was near its peak, or had crossed it. Everyone raced against time to fix the deals before the inevitable bust. So, there was vocal hope, but it was laced with silent doubts.

In my meetings with VCs and founders, I ended up with a question about the possible stock crash. Some avoided them, others turned their faces. But those who answered said, “We don’t know when, but it will come. It is better to get the deals and money now. It can come in a few months, or a year. No point waiting for it to happen. We have a few windows of opportunity.”

The windows were rather small and unlocked for a short while. In 2000, the technology stocks and NADAQ slumped. There was mayhem, as tech firms winded up operations. In a single month, 30,000 were sacked, both in the largest firms and thousands of start-ups. Finances for fledgling ventures vanished in thin air. Techies, especially Indians, were uprooted and disrupted.

On top of that, there were those in India, who were ready with their H-1Bs, but stranded as their trips to the US were cancelled. Like many of their counterparts in the US, they were ‘benched’, a term for those who waited for projects to open up so that they could be posted on clients’ sites. At that time, 100,000 found themselves in this situation – they had jobs but no work, earned part-salaries, and warmed up the benches.

An article in *BusinessWorld* captured this trend. “For example, Varun Khan, who works for a US-based consulting firm, has been on the bench for nearly three months. Others have been on the bench for much longer. NK Venkatesh, a software professional who works in Massachusetts, says he has met people who have been there for four to five months. The once remarkable flotilla of IT workers has crashed on the reef of a global tech slowdown.”

Given the disruptions, this mass of sacked and benched employees had to find work in India. Their American dreams were demolished. Luckily, they managed, as on-shoring led to off-shoring and outsourcing. Indian software firms convinced the US clients that it was cheaper to do the work at the Indian IT campuses, without compromising quality. This started a wave of hiring Indians in India to work for foreign clients. The new expansion for H-1B was ‘Has One Been’ to the US.

Once the dust settled, those who returned from the US talked about the boom days. While they preserved the desire to become start-up founders, they instilled similar feelings in their colleagues. At the same time, once the storm stemmed, people saw that the existing Indian owners of software and tech firms, both in the US and India, resumed their earlier money-making journeys. There was another herd mentality to become entrepreneurs.

In addition, the telecom connectivity and digital drive aided the start-ups, and the software sahibs decided to further eplore the New Economy universe. Social media, e-commerce, payment gateways, mobile apps, new delivery systems, and gaming became a part of upcoming fiefdoms. The digital players emerged as the harbingers of more business changes, which represented the raw energy, enthusiasm, and excitement of 21st-century India.

"Founders of these (existing) companies... closely witnessed the market asymmetries to realize the unlocked value in off-shoring. They returned home to set up IT businesses to capture this value. These IT companies also became the nurturing grounds for entrepreneurs. Early employees of such companies went on to establish giants... many of which, in turn, became breeding grounds for the next generation of entrepreneurs," explained a 2019 article on 'Knowledge@Wharton' website.

Sanjay Anandram, a VC, wrote, "For the first time, the educated middle class is actually creating jobs." A 2015 Amway survey concluded that the owners of these new Indian start-ups "want to learn new things", "want to enjoy life", "like to be in charge", and "tell others what to do". They were the markers of a new class, which was different from the previous ones. They conveyed a new hope that India could be the land of a billion businesspersons.

Just to re-remember the original premise, these ventures were launched by Brahmins and upper castes, and only a few by those from the lower castes. Author Gurcharan Das agreed that "a large proportion of the IT entrepreneurs are Brahmins". Nandan Nilekani, one of the co-founders of Infosys, credited the tradition of philosophical inquiry in India. This "gives us a good comfort level with conceptual things like software". By "us", he meant the upper castes.

Upstarts gives the glimpses of these times, when the educated elite wished to be on its own. A review on *First Post* said that the film "is a thoroughly researched, unabashed ode to India's start-up ecosystem in the post dot-com era that hit the market in the latter part of 2007, and witnessed the sudden mushrooming of tech-based ventures by young, budding entrepreneurs". The trend was battered by the Financial Crisis of 2008, and spiked again.

Some of the astute readers can sense that *Upstarts* isn't about the use of technology to innovate delivery systems – the supply of life-saving drugs to villagers. It is about the Indian approach towards 'fixing' things – *jugaad*. The Hindi word has positive and negative connotations. In the first case, it implies finding improvised, maybe quick-fix, answers to problems. In the latter one, it means temporary solutions that give a false sense of complacency.

We find it in use everywhere, especially when the fixer does not have the tools or components to do so. The electricity trips, and one uses a wire to act as a stop-gap circuit breaker. The pipe leaks, and there is the make-shift adhesive to take care of it. A diesel engine transforms a motorcycle into a three-wheeler. Software is pirated since we don't wish to buy an original one. Even i-phones codes are hacked.

Like in other nations, the Indian ecosystem saw a mix of *jugaad*, innovation, and out-of-box thinking. McDonald's starts its chain in India and, apart from a hefty meat- or cheeseburger, offers a smaller burger with a round potato patty inside. For the edgy palate, Indian-Chinese dishes use local spices. This happened in the case of the start-ups in the post-reforms age.

In the book, *Jugaad Innovation: Think Frugal, Be Flexible, Generate Breakthrough Growth*, the three authors presented an argument that this concept needed to be modernized to fuel growth and prosperity in the developed and emerging markets. In a conversation with 'Knowledge@ Wharton', they explained why. In the post-World War II world, R&D and quality developed to deliver predictability. This implied that everything was centralized, corporatized and structured.

Jugaad, with its positive overtones, helps people to become innovators and game-changers.. It can be modernized to fuel growth and prosperity

Since innovation became the preserve of a limited number of people, i.e. R&D labs within a few MNCs, despite the hundreds of billions of dollars spent, the returns were restricted to a few. Thus, R&D had to be rescued and democratized. *Jugaad* is a way to do so. It allows individuals to become innovators, or game-changers. Hence, its applications can be futuristic and positive. *Jugaad* needs to be pulled out of its traditional negative zone.

The authors give a few examples to illustrate the *jugaad* way of doing things. In a village in the Indian deserts, Mansukh Prajapati "turned to the natural cooling effects of clay to create a totally off-the-grid, green, biodegradable refrigerator called Mitticool". It stores fruits and vegetables for five days, and dairy products for two days, in villages without electricity.

One day, an engineer stuck in a traffic jam in Mumbai, asked a question: what if he converts the cars that run on gas into fuel-efficient high-performance hybrid ones? The result was Revolo, a conversion kit that includes the rechargeable battery pack, an electric marker, and a pulley. It can be retrofitted into most cars in six hours. "What is fascinating about this is that it costs only $2000 as opposed to $5000 in the West."

Pad Man (2018) depicts an archetypal *jugaad*-master. Lakshmikant Chauhan (Akshay Kumar) is modelled on a real person. He is unimpressed with a display of a Lord Hanuman idol at the village fair, which can break a coconut inserted in its mouth because he understands the mechanism behind it. He is a welder of chains for playground swings within the factory premises where he works; at home, he is a fixer.

For example, he converts a wind-up toy into an onion-chopping machine. But his ultimate aim is to save his wife the humiliation, desperation, and fear of dealing with her periods. In a village, where people cannot afford costly sanitary napkins, and where women in periods are shunned, he strives to invent a low-cost option to help his wife.

Although he is self-deprecating and funny, and experiments with napkin variants on himself, which is touching, a review in *Film Companion* dubbed him "a Superman without a cape" and "a memorable character". These qualities are reflected in his speech at the UN. Lakshmikant Chauhan is your next-door neighbor, who we depend on to 'fix' things on a daily basis.

CHAPTER 3

PAGE-3 INFLICTION

How entrepreneurship blooms due to networks based on family, caste, and class. They morph into partnerships across nationalities and identities, and through Page-3 associations and contracts.

Movies: *Hum Hain Rahi Pyar Ke* (1993); *Gurgaon* (2016); *Page 3* (2005); *Badmaash Company* (2010)

WHEN narratives are based on half-baked anecdotes, and vested interests do not wish facts to come in the way of constructing legends, the stories get warped. This is true about Brahmin Businesspersons. Over the repetitions and embellishments, their experiences turned into larger-than-life images. The start-ups launched by those who came from nowhere, and were only armed with education, became the ready-made, heat-and-eat success recipes.

While we contend that they were Brahmins, or from the upper castes, we maintain that they were from humble economic backgrounds. Their families had little or zero exposure to business, and survived as lower middle classes. Let us examine if this is true. I gave a few such examples in an earlier book, and several articles I wrote. The evidence is mixed; one can still conclude that at a social level, these entrepreneurs are at the top of the pyramid.

Two of the telecom tsars – one lording over the sector and the other who cashed out – came from privileged backgrounds. Sunil Mittal of Airtel is the son of a politician-minister in Punjab, who opened commercial doors for his son. As we will see later, politics played a role in the first eight mobile licences for the four metros. The so-called bids turned out to be a part of a policy-legal circus, and the ringmaster was the government.

Rajeev Chandrasekhar, who sold BPL Mobile and now runs a clutch of defence and media companies, boasts that he is a professional, who left Intel and became an entrepreneur. However, he is the son-in-law of a business family patriarch in the south, who owns the BPL conglomerate. With this backing, financial and political options opened out for him. Without it, it is difficult to imagine his mobile journey.

Hear the story of Rana Kapoor, the discredited owner of Yes Bank who hails from a jeweller's family. His father and two uncles refused to run the business. His grandfather sold the three stores – one meant for each son – before the Gold Control Act. (Bullion dealers reaped huge profits after the restrictions were imposed on the gold trade.) "My grandfather had no choice. When I played chess with him as a child, I told him, 'Don't worry, I will start a new business,'" says Rana.

Along with this trio, there were individuals whose parents worked in the state sector. The father of Ramesh Vangal, the former head of Pepsi India and a VC, retired as Class I government servant. Arun Jain, who launched software firm, Polaris, saw his father struggle at the Central Posts and Telegraph department. Arjun Malhotra, one of the co-founders of HCL who later launched Headstrong, a US-based IT consulting firm, is the son of an army officer, who took part in the 1962 India-China war.

Now consider their backgrounds. The sons of a politician, business patriarch, and trader require little elaboration. They were part of upper socio-economic crust of the society. The other three may seem to be from modest families. But think about it. The public sector backdrop was comfortable. The state took care of the basic amenities, especially access to quality education.

Most public sector units and state security forces had self-contained and self-enclosed communities, and their schools were good. Students could use their talent, skills and merit to make it to the quality institutes of higher learning. Some got scholarships, or help from their parents through company loans, to go abroad. Thus, they were better placed than the others to land jobs abroad, or work with renowned companies at home.

Before he joined Pepsi, Ramesh worked with P&G in Geneva, and handled export markets. As he told me, "I handled 22 nations, but the most striking experience was when we set up a joint venture in Egypt. I lived there for a year, we set up everything from scratch, and I had to understand the local culture and beliefs. I realized that I liked this entrepreneurial process." In Pepsi India, he tussled with policy-makers, critics, and corporate rivals.

Arjun wasn't so lucky. He had a scholarship to study at Stanford (US), but kept it in abeyance for five years because his girlfriend's family did not wish to wait for their marriage. He joined DCM's new computer division in India. At the last minute, DCM backtracked; its legal department did not want to take the risk. "We had the contacts, we knew the market, and we had designed the product. So, along with a few people under (Shiv) Nadar, we started HCL."

By the early 1980s, Arun had a US Green Card, and his brother-in-law, who was in America, urged him to come there. He hesitated and, with his friends, started a software services firm. But their hearts were in manufacturing – chips and semiconductors. This changed when Arun visited the US in the mid 1980s, and landed a job at a fair without carrying a copy of his degree. At Wang Labs, he saw the scale and potential in software.

While the large Indian firms talked about hiring a few dozen engineers, Wang had a thousand of them under a single roof. "Then and there, I took the decision to seek my future in software." Services, he realized, was as crucial, as hardware. Indians with knowledge of sciences and math could make it count in software. The global experience gave him a feel of what was achievable, and he was ready for it in the 1990s.

Clearly, the owners of the new start-ups were blessed. They may not have had the money, or business backgrounds (though some had), they had the other elements in their social environment that helped them to climb up the business ladder. One of them was their backgrounds that enabled them to study, and grab global experiences and knowledge. In some senses, they were better off than their colleagues from the more repressed families.

Several studies found that while the start-up ecosystem was inclusive, and allowed people from subservient classes to join it in the bigger cities, this wasn't the case in the small towns and villages. In the non-metropolitan areas, Carol Upadhaya found that most entrepreneurs were from the "upper and middle caste groups", and "not necessarily" from the lower castes.

A 2013 study by Ashwini Deshpande and Smriti Sharma found that among the MSME owners, scheduled castes and tribes were under-represented, and Hindu upper castes were over-represented. These disparities increased marginally between 2000 and 2007. But the two researchers found that the proportion of the lower and backward castes was higher in the rural areas. Such discrepancies can be explained by sampling issues, and because rural women define themselves as self-employed.

By default or by design, the Bollywood characters based on the new breed of founders were 'People Like Us' (PLUs). Most readers can identify with Kapil, Yash and Vinay in *Upstarts*. They are the youngsters we find among families, friends and acquaintances. Even the suave US-returned Veer Dhawan (Rajeev Sidhartha), who finances them, is like us. Kapil's emotional spiel to the Japanese investors stays with us.

The protagonist in *Pyaar Impossible*, Abhay, is what author Pico Iyer calls a "global soul". In the book by the same name, Pico explored what it meant to live in a transnational village, and the implications of sociability in a world without a home. Its back cover talked about a kind of modern corporate universalism, which is the sub-universe of globe-trotting Abhays. They crisscross nations, as also cultures and civilizations, and are subconsciously rooted to everything, and nothing.

In a seamless manner, Abhay moves from the West to East, from America to Singapore, in search of the investor who steals his software program. In the bargain, he doesn't seem to land in India, his real home (does his roots lie in the US?). He outsources responsibilities. When he is a nanny, he takes care of the house "mostly by paying contractors to clean it".

Even the Bollywood characters, who are second-generation businesspersons, seem nearer to us, rather than to our parents. We will discuss the following movies later, but Raj (Shah Rukh Khan) and Simran (Kajol) in *Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge* (1995), Rahul (Shah Rukh Khan) in *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (1998), and another Rahul (Aamir Khan) in *Hum Hain Rahi Pyar Ke* (1993) are PLUs. We see shades of ourselves in them.

Kehri Singh (Pankaj Tripathi) was a farmer, who lived a hand-to-mouth existence, but makes it big when the villages around the Capital are converted into residential and commercial areas. In *Gurgaon* (Satellite town off Delhi; 2016), the newbie realtor uses dubious means, as most real estate promoters do, and his business is built on shaky foundations. His son, Nikki (Akshay Oberoi), bets on cricket matches, and engages in criminal activities.

However, the patriarch, Kehri, wants to hand over his legacy not to his son, but the adopted daughter, Preet (Ragini Khanna), who returns from the US with a degree in architecture. The modern clashes with tradition – which is true in our cases too – and jumps out in one scene. When Preet's American friend asks why she wants to marry a man of her father's choice, she replies, "It's complicated.... Every inch of land that my father owns is in my name. I cannot say no to him."

From the reel and real personalities, it is evident that there is a self-fulfilling exercise, akin to a self-sustaining prophesy. Most start-up owners have specific traits. They are educated, can speak English, have global perspectives, and relate to other cultures. They have a combination of soft skills and acquired knowledge. More importantly, many of them have studied and worked abroad. They are a part of a unique entrepreneurial caste-and-class system.

Consider the laments of K Vatheeswaran, a co-founder of an e-commerce firm. He claimed that there is a "caste system" in the Indian start-up culture. What he implied is a mechanism that tends to favor people from similar family and educational backgrounds. These people think and behave in a cosmopolitan manner because they adopt the same mores, values, customs, and ways of life.

For example, the software and digital start-ups were launched by those who studied and worked abroad. Their successes prompted financiers and stakeholders to seek similar entrepreneurs. It tends to become a closed and circular loop, which allows certain people to hop on to the gravy train. The others – who look and feel different – are cast aside. The trend accentuates, and gathers momentum, and creates a new set of socio-economic classes.

It boils down to networks, informal and formal, related to class and caste, which can work in looser expansive forms. In India, for centuries, the trading communities, like the Marwari, provided employment, financial, social, and emotional linkages within their communities. When someone ventured out of his village, and did well in the capitals of the kingdoms, he invited others from his and nearby villages, and provided the amenities to help them initially.

"Records account two charitable messes for Marwaris working in Calcutta (Kolkata), in the early twentieth century.... GD Birla's grandfather, Shiv Narain, settled in a *basa* run on a cooperative basis by migrants from his home village of Pilani when he first arrived in Bombay.... Besides providing food and a place to sleep, the messes were informal training schools and networking opportunities for the newly-arrived," wrote Thomas A Timberg in his seminal book on the Marwari.

Such systems are visible globally. Hein Streefkerk, an academic, felt that "caste and kinship provide business people the social capital required for successful entrepreneurship. Primordial ties offer access to and control over skills, administration, markets, capital, and labor. The ideas and structure of caste are, instead of being eroded, crucial in the mobilization and monopolization of resources, and recruitment and control of labor". Whatever you may say, caste and class do matter.

GD Birla's grand-dad settled in a basa run by migrants from his village. The mess provided food and place to stay, and network opportunities

Over time, experts found that such connections developed into what Robert Putnam dubbed as localized "networks of civic management". In his book, *Making Democracy Work*, he wrote that "in these locales of civic management people know one another and one another's families; they meet frequently in non-work related organizations and activities. They constitute a dense and rich social community. Business relationships are embedded in community and family structures".

However, in modern times, such linkages became universal and were no longer limited to caste, class and kinship. Instead, they expanded to include individuals and communities that interacted in certain socio-economic environment, thought and felt similarly, and whose minds and hearts were cosmopolitan and global. Such individuals could recognize each other at hotels, airports, corporate offices, and in bars and clubs.

Take the case of the networking during the 1990s tech boom in the Silicon Valley, and what we see now in the Indian cities like Bengaluru. In a study

(2000), which was published as a chapter in *The Silicon Valley Edge*, Hokyu Hwang, Ellen Granovetter, and Mark Granovetter wrote that the Valley networks "have special importance in the movement of labor, the evolution of influence and power, and the actual production of innovation". They benefitted people from different nationalities.

Researchers Stephen Cohen and Gary Fields (*Social Capital and Capital Gains, or Virtual Bowling in Silicon Valley*) concluded that the Valley is "notoriously a world of strangers, nobody knows anybody else's mother there. It is a world of independent – even isolated – newcomers". What spurred them to help each other were "collaborative partnerships that emerged in the region owing to the pursuit by economic and institutional actors of objectives related to innovation and competition".

Broad connections work in India. During the 1990s, when Indians moved to the US on H-1B visas, friends helped each other to land the plum jobs. In the former Andhra Pradesh, for instance, those in the US told the ones back home about the new openings. In India, friends helped the applicants in phone interviews, in case the latter lacked English skills. Once the workers reached the US, colleagues covered up for their initial lack of skills.

Individuals, who went to the same colleges, worked in the same offices, and met outside for drinks were better placed to take advantage of these social set-ups. Upadhaya felt that the beneficiaries were from "primarily middle-class families who possess not only the economic means but also the social and cultural capital needed to equip their children to enter professional, managerial and technical jobs as offered by the IT industry".

From these diverse subsets, which became part of an informal set of people, emerged a new breed of entrepreneurs. They met the financiers and other stakeholders, who were part of the ecosystem and shared the same values and ideals. People had common qualities and traits that pulled them towards each other. More than professional chemistry, it was the personal biology and physics that seemed to work.

Page 3 (2005) is a movie that offers another facet of how these social networks develop. It gives an exaggerated version of how the neo-rich live, and about their social symbols. A number of Indian start-up tycoons, both in the US and at home, adopted these lifestyles. But the movie portrays characters – journalists, air hostesses, and wannabe actresses – that aspire to be a part of the ostentatious Page-3 society.

For most of us, Page 3 is merely a page in the newspapers that focuses on the social parties hosted and frequented by tycoons, celebrities, culture-vultures, lobbyists and middlemen, politicians, bureaucrats, and others who are allied to the wealthy sub-cultures. Money and power intermingle at these gatherings, and the guests include those who work and party in wilder and weirder ways. People pay to be featured on Page 3 to show that they have arrived.

For those who don't feature on Page 3, it is an album about how the wealthy minority lives. Vineet Jain of the *Times of India*, who is credited with the idea in India, said in a panel discussion that the page "serves as an aspiration model for those who want to be like the Page 3 celebrities in life". Naveen Jindal, an MP, who is a regular on Page 3, said that it is "dedicated to the high society which wants to know all that is happening in their social circuits".

I attended such parties, which were organized by businesspersons, celebrities, and lobbyists. It was fascinating to watch how the interactions operated at two bizarre levels. There were serious discussions about the state of the nation and world, and the burning events. These were sprinkled with crass gender-biased jokes, drinking and drunkenness, and ogling at women.

Not surprisingly, the movie operates at two planes. On the one hand, it shows the struggling lives of three women, who are an inherent part of the Page 3 culture. It captures their travails as they hurtle from one crisis to another, in a world that's insensitive, individualistic, and powerful to hide sordid truths. At the other extreme are the influencers, who run the nation, govern our society, and do so in an inhuman manner.

This dichotomy is clear from the movie's climax. Journalist Madhavi (Konkona Sen) investigates a child molestation racket run by corporate bigwigs, and feels that it will appear on the front page of her newspaper. The media owner is in league with the businessmen, who account for the paper's ad revenues. The news is killed. Madhavi, who had left Page-3 journalism to become an investigative reporter, joins a new paper – as a Page-3 writer.

Business Brahmins, as the Page 3 movie reveals, built another myth. They convinced the public that since they hailed from humble families – this isn't always true – they have other traits that are different from the traditional businesspersons. This entails a set of ethics, social responsibility, and honesty. They partake in legal profits, treat employees fairly, and reward the workers with stock options. They are the new Gods of Midas.

Brahminical concepts are conjured up to prove that this is true. It is said that the upper caste founders follow the legacies blazed by Lord Ram, who accepted challenges in his stride and set new standards for "purity of behavior". They are like Arjuna in Mahabharata who, when he was convinced by Lord Krishna, daringly and fearlessly followed the path of Karma. They can be like Lord Krishna, whose cunning helps the good to win over evil.

Sadly, this is false, or partially true. The Indian software reign began when companies ferreted people to the US, and treated them like new-age slaves. The engineers were like software clerks, whose passports were impounded by employers, and they were forced to live in small apartments. The visa norms were violated, as was the quotas on H-1Bs. Infosys paid huge fines.

In 2013, Infosys paid $34 million in the US to settle charges of "systemic visa fraud and abuse of immigration process". This allowed the company to maintain that the charges were not proved in a court of law. In the past, Indian companies were shut down because of the manner in which they paid employees below the minimum wages. US regulators introduced strict procedures for visa processing, and emoluments.

Bollywood caught the contradiction between the urge to do public good, and obsession to earn illicit profits. Badmaash Company captured this spirit

Indian pharma firms were indicted by the global regulators. In the Ranbaxy case, the allegations were that the company cooked up data that indicated the efficacy of drugs. This enabled it to get speedy permissions to market them in North America and Europe. Visits by the regulators at the Indian factories found abysmal conditions, which prompted them to shut them for months.

Rana's Yes Bank found itself in trouble, largely because of the owner's shenanigans. The founder flouted prudent norms, doled out loans without procedures and scrutiny, and ended up with a huge mound of bad loans. Yes Bank was considered to be the bank of the last resort for desperate and dishonest corporate borrowers. If they couldn't get loans, Yes Bank chipped in.

Bollywood caught this contradiction – the urge to do public good, and the obsession to earn illicit profits. A review in *News18* on *Upstarts* said, "However, not all seem to be toeing the profitability line. We see another character running a suicide prevention helpline app, and another one delivering medical services to flood affected areas." But, as the *Times of India* puts it, "ethical (related to profits) differences crop up between the three friends", who are the founders of CarryKaro.

Either for business reasons – the urge to show growth every quarter to stay ahead in the valuation game – or for personal ones, Brahmin Businessmen take the illegal path because it is easy to make money down this route. The movie, *Badmaash Company* (2010), captures this spirit. Karan (Shahid

Kapoor) wants to launch a legitimate company with friends. But his father's heart attack and mother's pawning of jewellery forces him to become rich fast.

He comes up with an idea to import Reebok shoes without payment of import duties. He orders consignments, one half of them contain only the left-feet shoes, which land in Kolkata, and the other half that have right-feet shoes reach Chennai. At both the places, Karan and "Friends and Company", refuse to accept the products, which are confiscated by Customs. Later, when they are auctioned, the original importers purchase them at scrap prices.

A realistic touch appears when the policy-makers slash import duties. The margins are no longer lucrative, and Karan and friends travel to the US, where they import gloves – right and left hand ones separately. One of them takes a loan (90% of the value) against a house, which is sold to another friend, who borrows a similar amount, and the cycle continues. The original lender declares bankruptcy, the house is impounded by the bank, but the trio doesn't have to repay the second and third loans.

CHAPTER 4

ZINDAGI NA MILEGI DOBARA

The obsession with brands and choices engulfs the middle class due to three A's (availability, accessibility and acceptability) and two S's (social status and self-esteem). The distinction between salad bowl and melting pot remains, as the consumption class is fragmented.

Movies: *Dil Chahta Hai* (2001);
Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara (2011);
Hum Aapke Hai Kaun (1994);
Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge (1995);
Kuch Kuch Hota Hai (1998)

SINCE you have one life – unless you believe in reincarnation – you may as well live it 'King Size'. *Dil (Bahut Kuch) Chahta Hai* (Heart desires a lot more). These are the new mantras of the Indian middle class. The changing attitude towards wealth, in its myriad variations like ownership of gadgets (latest mobile that changes every few months), assets (state-of-the-art home theatre), and properties (several in different locations), is the defining feature of reforms.

Over the past few decades, the possession and pursuit of wealth became acceptable. Even the flaunting of it, through expensive holidays and entertainment, isn't frowned upon. If you earn, spend on yourself. There is no shame or disgrace to it. One can have a winter and summer home. One can own three cars, and juggle with three mobiles.

Of course, this wasn't the case until the 1980s. In those days, urban teenagers craved for foreign brands. A friend purchased second-hand Wrangler labels from foreigners and back-packers, and stitched them on to his *desi* denims. I waited for my father to come back from foreign trips with the remote-controlled toys, and chocolates. We showed off the jeans and toys to friends.

Jayati, 45, a school administrator in a metro, reminisces how she salivated on foreign products at her in-law's house. "I never ate foreign chocolates. The fridge was stuffed with them because my father-in-law travelled abroad. I gorged on them, and I couldn't believe that my husband wasn't bothered. They were my reverse-dowry, the jewels that I got from my spouse's side."

Now, there is a surfeit of choices, even the paradox of many. At a denim store, you can choose between dozens of labels and sub-labels, and the fits – relaxed, straight, tight, slim, and baggy. You smirk and turn your face away if a school friend offers foreign chocolates and candies. My friends struggle for months to decide which car to buy. But, at the same time, it is also fashionable to shun foreign, and buy Indian brands.

What has changed is our attitude towards wealth, and the association with brands, thanks to the three A's and two S's. Let us consider the notions of availability, accessibility and acceptability. In a way, we mentioned them earlier. The markets are stocked with different kinds of products, and services. More importantly, many of them are affordable; they are cheap because of competition and huge cuts in Custom duties.

But it is the two S's – social status and self-esteem – that need explanation. More than a century ago, in his seminal book, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, Thorstein Veblen wrote about the twin concepts of "conspicuous leisure" and "conspicuous consumption". He said that the rich were debauched and decadent. Not only were they unproductive, and did not contribute to the economy, they indulged in wasteful expenditure. This was symptomatic of their "superfluous lifestyle".

Slowly, as per Veblen's timeline, the desire to wear one's social status – real and imagined – on one's sleeves was adopted by the middle class. They, in a bid to ape the wealthy, indulged in "vicarious consumption". In the now modern, capitalist and market-oriented age, "good repute... rests in pecuniary strength; and the means of... gaining or retaining a good name, are leisure and a conspicuous consumption of goods".

Brands or assets, which are a way to convey social status, intertwine with self-esteem. One's social hierarchy isn't isolated in an individualistic vacuum. Each person's belief matters. Historian-economist Karl Marx likened the collective conspicuous consumption to "commodity fetish". Every affected human "erroneously" believes that certain products (or brands) "possess prestige value and... confer respect, authority and deference to those who acquire such objects of status".

Several studies connected the self to the social. Some indicated that individuals "convey themselves" when they buy a particular brand. Others concluded that the purchase of a product allowed one to "inform others about oneself". The address of your house enables people to know what you have achieved. Your car and phone says a lot about you, and those who see them know that you belong to a certain class.

Social status has broader connotations compared to self-image. As the two intersect and converge in the minds of the people, they tend to reflect a two-pronged consumption urge. At one level, the new consumers strive to achieve more of the same, more salaries and assets than their parents. At the other plane, they tend to go out of their way to reflect their uniqueness from the other neo-consumers. Their possessions, they say, are different.

A book edited by Christopher Jaffrelot and Peter van der Veer had examples of young consumers, whose desires for better lives exceeded those of their parents. "Yes, I think I have a better life than my parents. My father's last-drawn salary was less than what I had as my first salary. All the comforts that they struggled to get are available for us in one or two years.... My dad could never afford a car. I am able to purchase a car at this young age," says a software employee.

These financial and materialistic goals are universal. Unlike the majority of the older generation, the young do own a house – or two – and a car (or two). They spend without having to blink their eyes; they don't look at the prices on the menu in a restaurant, as our parents did. They want security in the form of savings and investments. The young want more of these, and in the shortest possible time – a few years, rather than decades.

Aspirations turn into actuality, even as needs become wants. A car, for instance, isn't a necessity to carry people from Point A to B. It is a way to tell the world who you are. A house isn't a matter of four walls and a roof. It is a home you invite friends and relatives to. The new consumers feel that they deserve what they purchase. They earn, they spend.

Young consumers admit they are 'I can, so I will' genre of spenders. They wish to enjoy today, forget tomorrow. It is about self indulgence

For my earlier book, *The Indian Consumer*, I spoke to members of the neo-middle class. They admitted that they had become the "I can, so I will" genre of spenders, who followed their instincts and impulses, as much as they were driven by practicality. One of the two experts I spoke to described their attitudes as the "enjoy today, forget tomorrow" one. The other said that the mindset of the new generation changed from "self denial to self indulgence".

However, since the mindset to achieve social status is inspired by self-esteem, various sections from the younger generation differentiate themselves from the others. As is the case with the rich, a snob value afflicts people. The neo-rich feel they are different from the traditional counterparts. The same is true with the middle class.

Gen-Z claims to be different from Gen-X and millennial. Today's teenagers say that their views about status and symbols are unique. "We believe in global issues like Climate Change and greenhouse effect. We shun smoking and drinking. Our spending is dictated by new fashion trends and culture icons," confides Kaushiki, who turned 18 in 2019. She says that she "flexes" (read: shows off) gadgets and possessions, but only on social media.

When I probe her a bit, she sounds as if she is talking in Latin or Greek. Her fashion and other role models include "Instagram Baddies" with their neo-street wear. The "E-boy/E-girl" human aesthetics relate to a "gothic grunge" style with dark clothes, denims, leather, and chains. The VSCO girls and soft girls specialize in cosmetics and make-ups. But they don't use the usual products; they opt for "cruelty-free" brands, and their imagination is "more subtle and humble". Go figure.

The depiction of wealth in a positive manner, as non-judgmental rather than exceptional, in Bollywood movies was unmistakable since the 1990s. Several critics feel that *Dil Chahta Hai* (Heart Desires; DCH; 2001), a movie about three male friends and their twisted and warped lives, proved to be the turning point. Shekhar Gupta felt that it was one of the first films to celebrate "riches, high life, (and) luxury" quite unapologetically.

"Here all of them and their women are rich. They drink champagne and wine. They happily ditch old boy/girlfriends and hitch on to new ones. They flaunt the symbols of affluence: cellphones, resort holidays in Goa, 51-inch flat-screen televisions. They ride a Merc now and a Lexus then, drink beer from the bottle while driving, and yet use seat-belts. When was the last time you saw a Hindi film that was so relaxed, so non-judgmental, so in-your-face about being rich?," Gupta wrote.

It is the lifestyle and dialogues between the male protagonists, and their girlfriends, and not the plot, which seem meaningful in the movie. Three college friends – Akash (Aamir Khan), Sameer (Saif Ali Khan), and Siddhartha (Akshaya Khanna) – drift apart. This happens after an incident, when Sid slaps Akash, who makes a disparaged remark about the elderly-divorced Tara Jaiswal (Dimple Kapadia), who is Sid's love.

Akash moves to Australia to manage his father's business, and meets Shalini (Preity Zinta), a college acquaintance, and falls in love with her even though she is engaged. Sameer's parents arrange his marriage to Pooja (Sonali Kulkarni), who is in love with another man. Sid grapples with his love for an alcoholic Tara, who is uncomfortable with the age difference between the two.

But the three friends reunite when Tara dies, and a grieving Sid calls up Sameer, who contacts Akash. They meet, their love angles are untangled, which is evident six months later, when five people – the trio, along with Shalini and Pooja – take a trip to Goa. There Sid meets another woman. (This is reminiscent of the earlier Goa trip that the three men take during their college days, and Sameer falls in love with a woman.)

(Feminists view DCH in a different vein. They think of it as male dominated, even male chauvinistic. The three men are in the forefront; the women occupy the back stage. Shalini and Tara do have a mind of their own, but their thoughts and feelings invariably seem to be below those of the men. As one of the feminists tells me, "It is the men who work, earn, and own (the glitzy gadgets). I have a problem with the movie's plot. It's regressive for a movie released in 2001.")

A decade later, *Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara* (You only live once; ZNMD; 2011), another film on male-bonding, presents wealth as a sub-narrative to the main plot. Each character has enough to enjoy, and does not need to think before spending. But this film is also a case study on how to market a movie. It used the modern tools of reforms to reach out to the audience before the release. A review in the *Economic Times* said that it was ironic that it was two female writers who came up with the idea.

According to sources, promotional videos of ZNMD were available on mobile and Internet, and the trailer was watched by 55 million within 48 hours. The cast and crew embarked on a Mumbai-Delhi road trip – like the foreign journey the heroes undertake in the movie – which culminated in a concert in Gurgaon. The car used for the trip was sponsored by the Indian-British Land Rover. Music videos and two dialogue promos were released.

Product promotion deals were signed with soft drink, Mountain Dew, Gillette (men's accessories), and ING Vysya Bank. A mobile game based on ZNMD and the La Tomatina festival, which was showcased in the movie, was available to run with popular operating systems. An eyewear brand, OPIUM, launched the ZNMD sunglasses. It wasn't about wealth; it was also about how you spent the money – casually.

Before DCH and ZNMD made their mark, Bollywood realized that economic disparities were vanishing. Not that they did not exist – studies showed that reforms enhanced inequalities – but that people, especially the middle class, were confident about the future. If they had not prospered because of the market policies, they felt that they would do so in the near future. Hence, the enjoyment of wealth was nothing to abhor and hate.

Forget about the other aspects of *Hum Aapke Hai Kaun* (What is my relationship to you?; 1994), and focus on the facts that there are no questions raised about the wealth on display. A review in *Timeout* said, "Nothing else really happens, yet its shameless lavish depiction of every celebration of a perfect north Indian family, and especially their elaborate colorful Hindu wedding rituals, sucked audiences into cinemas again and again."

Karan Johar's *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (Something happens; KKHH; 1998) presents glimpses of the new India that were re-created by reforms. Several reviews and analyses concluded that the film related to the changing economic and social trends. Actors wore costumes with designer logos like DKNY and Polo. Along with his friend, designer Manish Malhotra, Johar made trips to London to select the costumes. His father and producer, Yash Chopra, was agitated about the film's burgeoning budget.

In interviews, Johar said that the college scenes was patterned after *Beverly Hills 90210*. The art director replicated Riverdale High School from Archie comics. "If you see KKHH, Shah Rukh plays Archie, Rani Mukherji plays Veronica, and Kajol plays Betty. It was exactly that. And the principal looked like Weatherbee, and Ms Grundy was Archana Puran Singh," said Johar.

It's a love triangle. Two women like the same man in college, one as a friend and the other in a romantic way. The lovers (Shah Rukh Khan and Rani Mukherji) marry, and have a daughter. The third (Kajol) leaves college, when she realizes that she too is in love. Tragedy strikes when the wife dies, the daughter finds out about her father's unrealized love from the letters left behind by her mother, and decides to unite the two. There is a twist – Kajol is about to marry another man – before the happy ending.

(Like in the case of DCH, feminists dislike HAHK and KKHH, apart from *Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge*, or DDLJ. They feel that these movies depict women in a traditional archetype manner. Females play second fiddle, or minimal roles, in the male-dominated society. To project such characters in the post-reforms era, is backward and demeaning. It is an innate gender bias that inflicts even the most progressive men.)

Although they appear a decade apart, Akash, Sameer and Sid of DCH resonate amicably with Arjun (Hrithik Roshan), Kabir (Abhay Deol) and Imran (Farhan Akhtar), the three friends in ZNMD. One can imagine Laila (Katrina Kaif) and Natasha (Kalki Koechlin) of the latter movie having open, fun-loving, serious, and stupid conversations with Shalini and Pooja of DCH. We can invite them to a party, and they may hit it off.

Yet, if we look closely, there are variations between Akash and Arjun. The latter, a London-based financial broker, is a workaholic who is wedded to his mobile. Once he moves to Australia, Akash sits in his large office with a crazy skyline, but shows no business urgency. The first makes money move from one market to another. The latter earns profits without stress.

From his college days, Akash doesn't believe in love; he mocks romance, including Sid's love for Tara, which leads to a slap and break-up of the friendship. Arjun has no time for love, given his obsession with markets and stocks. Money, in the most philosophical term, moves him. And when the duo meet their future loves, the first takes his time to realize that it is indeed love, and the latter somehow plunges headlong into it.

When Arjun meets Laila, they flirt. After the three friends leave Costa Brava in Spain, Laila chases them on a bike to plant a passionate kiss on Arjun. They are not sure if they will meet again; they do so because Imran invites Laila to join them in Pamplona (Spain). Before they participate in a bull race, the three friends make a pact – Imran will publish his poems, Kabir will tell his fiancé he doesn't wish to marry her, and Arjun will go on a holiday with Laila.

After he meets Shalini in Sydney, Akash's feelings unravel slowly, and the emotions sink in when she returns to India to marry her fiancé. Akash heads back, and broods. On her wedding day, encouraged by Shalini's uncle, Mahesh (Rajat Kapoor), he proposes to her. She says yes – after an encouraging nod from her fiancé's parents, who had raised her.

Laila may have similar sensibilities as Shalini, but, in many ways, they seem dissimilar. One cannot imagine the former's whims and fancies to affect the latter. One cannot fathom Laila to undergo the same conflicts that Shalini does, when she has to choose between her love, and responsibilities. It is not about whether one is liberal, open, goes to a bar, engages in conversations with the other sex, and feels equal to men.

After a candid criticism of the middle class, author Pavan Varma wrote years later that India's salad bowl transformed into a melting pot

If one compares Nisha (Madhuri Dixit) of HAHK, Simran (Kajol) of DDLJ, and Tina (Rani Mukherji) of KKHH – the three actresses of the 1990s – with Laila and Shalini of this century, there is a connect and disconnect. Despite being the fashionable Veronica, Tina cannot fit the same personality as Laila. Even Anjali (Kajol), the Betty in KKHH, isn't the same. The differences between them are the same as those between Gen-X, Gen-Y and Gen-Z.

Bollywood got it right. From the 1990s, it showed people, who were similar in some ways, yet different in others. There was a generation gap between the teenagers in the 1990s and 2000s, and there were personality fissures between the teens within the same generation. In real life, researchers tussled with this duality, the similarities and differences within and across generations. But, in the beginning, they portrayed the middle class as a homogeneous entity.

As late as 2014, author Pavan Varma wrote a short sequel, *New Indian Middle Class*, to his earlier grand theory in the book, *Great Indian Middle Class*. In the former, he wrote, "Gradually, the salad bowl of India has transformed into a melting pot, and with that it has given the middle class the homogeneity of a class rather than a collation of castes." He felt that the Indian middle class was beginning to ape the West.

Varma said that while caste loyalties remained, there was a growing group, especially of young people, which wore the same clothes, watched the same movies, read the same newspapers, competed for the same jobs, ate the same food, had the same education, wanted the same goods, and spoke the same language(s). "The overwhelming percentage of the middle class is around twenty five (years), with the largest percentile between the age of eighteen and twenty five," he wrote.

However, researchers had begun to say this decades ago. One of the reasons for this was the frenzy to project India as a huge opportunity, where the customers' behaviors were the same as their western counterparts. Imagine hundreds of millions of consumers, who were more than willing to lap up a car, refrigerator, TV, and what not.

The other problem was due to the responses that the researchers got in their surveys. In one (NCAER-University of Maryland) of them, they found it odd that the poor and low-income families categorized themselves as middle class. The survey reported that "49% of the respondents identified themselves as middle class, despite the fact that the median household income for a typical family of four was Rs 5,000 a month".

Social stigma was one of the reasons why people maintained that they were better off than they really were. No one wanted to be categorized as poor during a period when prosperity seemed to rule. As people became spenders, those who couldn't do so felt that they would soon reach there. In 2014, Devesh Kumar and Milan Vaishnav found that 60% of the respondents were "optimistic about their future prospects", and believed that their "materialistic living conditions" would improve.

Clearly, there were expectations among sections that their lives would become prosperous. However, this mindset did not preclude the fact that there were differences between the various sub-sections. The poor were poor, and the lower income classes were not in the same league as the middle and higher income groups. There were caste and class divisions, as there were differences within the castes and classes.

Surinder S Jodka and Aseem Prakash wrote in a 2016 blog, "Even when the rise of the middle class transforms the way people think, behave, and relate to each other, the process does not do away with inequalities of caste and community. Those trying to move up the new social and economic order use their available resources and networks, including those of caste and kinship to stabilize and improve their positions in the emerging social order...."

Another prism to split the sub-constituents of the middle class is through occupations. There is diversity between those who work abroad, become NRIs or get the American green cards, and the ones who don't and live in India. People who work for large private companies think there are distinctions between them and those who are employed with the public sector.

Kishore Biyani, the founder of Future Group, used a wider canvass to describe the disparity. He divided Indians into three groups. In his book, *It Happened In India* (2007), he dubbed them as India One (consuming class), India Two (serving class), and India Three (dependent class). The first includes the rich and PLUs, the second those who work for us (maids and drivers), and the third the poor who strive for two square meals a day.

India Two aspires to join India One, but the process is slow because the latter rarely pays the former enough. It's only a generation later when the sons and daughters of India Two get education and earn enough to become spenders, rather than aspirers. The transition from India Three to India Two is easier, but only if enough jobs are created at the lower and middle levels.

Experts use the ideology lens to peel the layers within the middle class. The generation of the 1950s and 1960s was driven by idealism and nationalism (because of the wars with the two neighbors). In the 1970s, we witnessed the frustrations and desperations, as cynicism, greed and corruption reigned supreme. Since the 1990s, there was ostensibly a rise in meritocracy, which was skewed towards the elite, and stained by new forms of dishonesty.

Despite the fact that India's middle class is fragmented due to various reasons, one cannot forget the conclusions reached by Varma and others. There are similarities between the sub-sections. It is a case of how we wish to see the light that travels through a prism – broken up into seven colors, or combined into a single one. We can think of the middle class as vibrant and multi-hued, or consistent and identical.

The salad bowl cannot become a melting pot, and this is evident in the western markets, where experts are beginning to make distinctions based on socio-economic backgrounds, communities, gender, race, and other factors. In fact, diversity will coexist with growing uniformity, as aspirations drive the various segments together, and socio-economic priorities and realities create wedges between them. In a vast country like India, the differences influence the similarities. Or is it the opposite?

CHAPTER 5

HAMARI SULLU

No one has a fix on the size of the middle class, which ranges from 25 million to 700 million. It is "conceived, packaged and sold" to sellers and investors. The contentious comparisons: income versus wealth, and consumers versus aspirers/strivers.

Movies: *Swades* (2004); *Khosla Ka Ghosla* (2004); *Tumhari Sullu* (2017); *Gully Boy* (2019); *Mere Dad Ki Maruti* (2013); *Maska* (2020); *Fashion* (2008); *Gangoobai* (2013)

FIRST,

the numbers were plucked out of thin air. They were conjectures, which were backed by back-of-the-envelope calculations. This was clear when I met scores of foreign CEOs, who flew to India to sign deals with excited Indian counterparts, during the late-1980s. This was the time when Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi eased imports, and allowed foreign pacts in sectors like automobile and computer hardware.

One of the first questions we, as journalists, popped up was: What was the size of the Indian market for these products? How many people could buy cars, computers, and other foreign brands that were either being assembled in, or imported into, the country? Even we would think twice, or thrice, before buying them. Since no one had any clue about the size of the Indian middle class, the statistics depended on the product.

If we spoke to a CEO of a Japanese motorbike maker, he would explain in his broken English – none of the Japanese would publicly speak the language, although we suspected they understood everything – that the market was huge. "If 1% purchased bikes, we would happy with 20% share." If the product was less expensive, say, a shaving razor, the 1% would be substituted by 10%.

We thought this was madness. As per the 1981 Census, India's population was 700 million. One per cent was seven million, and a 20% share translated into almost one-and-a-half million bikes. For a razor, it meant a market of 70 million units, and a share of 14 million. We were sure that the Indian buyers could not consume so many bikes and razors.

However, since we were urged, sometimes forced, by our editors to add statistics to our articles, we played ball. We quoted these superficial figures, as if they were sacrosanct. Just to give a glimpse of how crazy these predictions were, the annual sales of motorbikes crossed the seven million mark in 2009-10, or two decades after the estimates were made.

Once reforms kicked in, there was a scramble to find realistic figures related to the size of the middle class. This was because the companies had to give a meaningful idea about the size to satisfy the curiosity of the media, and their stakeholders. The policy makers, who managed the precarious national finances, had to convince foreign investors. The IMF too was a player.

Thanks to a huge slump in foreign exchange reserves, bloated and artificial exchange rate of the rupee, and pressures on government revenues and fiscal deficit, India took loans from the IMF. There were allegations that the liberalization blueprint was dictated by the Fund, although many contested them. The IMF had to convince the world that the India story was lucrative.

What one needs to remember is that in a market economy, even a mature western one, the size of the middle class is crucial. It forms the skeleton, which supports the carefully-constructed socio-economic body structure of a country. Without it, investors adopt a wait-and-watch attitude, and the possibility of high growth is uncertain. The idea behind reforms is to create and enhance a wealthier middle class.

Politically, the middle class, being educated, aware, and armed with higher disposable incomes, demands efficient governance. No longer is it satisfied with potholed roads, electricity outages, and paucity of brands. Economically, it is this class that drives the consumption of goods and services. Socially, it strives for equality, which translates into the pull factor – the objective is to haul up the poor and lower-income groups.

Enter the NCAER, a think tank that pioneered the art and science to calculate the size of the middle class. In 1989-90, it took baby steps to quantify it, and claimed that 40% of the households could be categorized as middle and rich classes. As per the 1991 Census, India's population was 850 million (700 million in 1981). This implied that 350 million were potential consumers. In 1995-96, the figure climbed up to an unbelievable 80%, or 680 million.

NCAER can claim that vested interests exaggerated its conclusions. The reason: its figures for 1989-90 and 1995-96 included a disclaimer. In both, a sizeable portion, 27% and 26.7%, respectively, was labelled as low income group, as opposed to those who constituted a part of middle income, upper-middle income, and high income ones. The low income section wasn't poor, but it couldn't be counted as a consuming class, or purchaser of cars.

However, even if we remove the low income and poor groups from the calculations, the size of the middle and rich classes was still an impressive 450 million in 1995-96, or 53% of the population. In her book, *We Are Like This Only* (2008), marketing consultant Rama Bijapurkar wrote, "The story put out was that there was a sleeping beauty called Middle Class India, comprising 250 to 300 million people, who had money and a burning desire to consume, and nothing decent to buy."

By the early 2000s, there was a sober recognition that the figures were like scrambled eggs, a mash of white and yellow, mix of black and white that was essentially grey. Bijapurkar explained, "The truth is that the Great Indian

Middle Class was a seductive idea that was conceived, packaged, and sold to the world by India as part of its sales pitch...." Hansa Research, in 2006, added, "In fact, no one really has a fix on the nebulous entity called the middle class."

Remarkably, by this time, Bollywood was subconsciously – or maybe it was conscious – telling audiences not to get fooled by the random numbers being thrown around by the experts. In 2004, there were two Hindi movies that highlighted the reality that the middle class was not a collective entity but a turbulent, ever-changing blend of socio-economic segments. To understand its true nature, one had to adopt a nuanced and complex approach.

Swades (My country) is a story about Mohan Bhargava (Shah Rukh Khan), an affluent, young, mobile, and global NRI. His application for US citizenship is approved, and his personal affectations include a car, an apartment, and electronic gadgets. As a project manager in NASA, he is at the pinnacle of professional achievement. As the movie begins, he is posited as a classic 1980s and1990s NRI – Non-Returning Indian, or Non-Responsible Indian, who has no intention of coming back home.

As the plot progresses, Bhargava consciously becomes a part of a new breed of NRIs who, according to Purnima Mankekar, wished to become the "new messiah(s) of liberalization" and "saviors of nation's economy". Until then, in movies like DDLJ, the NRI protagonist wishes to seek India as an investment destination – set up a factory in rural Punjab. But, in *Swades*, said Mankekar, the aim shifted from "financial to effective investment in the homeland".

No longer is the NRI interested in the profit potential – the return on investment. Bhargava wants to make a difference where it matters, i.e. in more than 650,000 villages. "The film uses water and light as an overarching metaphor for unifying human needs, technology (remember the hero is a NASA scientist) and nature as a metaphor for unifying global perspectives with local perspectives," stated a review in www.eprints.hud.ac.uk.

Like China benefitted from huge investment inflows from non-resident Chinese, India felt that it could do the same with NRIs. In his 1998 Budget speech, Finance Minister Yashwant Sinha said, "I believe NRIs constitute a huge untapped potential for India's development. I propose the following steps to encourage NRIs to participate in the development of their country of origin." A section of NRIs wanted to use their global successes to help India emerge as an economic superpower.

Juxtapose Bhargava, who achieves materialist glory and, as the movie unfolds, harbors a grander societal dream, against the Punjabi family in *Khosla Ka Ghosla* (Khosla's Nest/home). The Khosla patriarch, Kamal Kishore

(Anupam Kher), has minimal cravings. His savings are invested in a plot, where he wants to build a house for his two sons, Cherry (Parvin Dabas) and Bunty (Ranvir Shorey), and wife, Sudha (Kiran Juneja). The daughter, Nikki (Rupam Bajwa), will live with her husband after marriage.

Although the Khosla family lives decently, it does not have the possessions that Bhargava has – no car, gadgets, or a swank apartment. When the former's plot is illegally usurped by a land shark, Kishen Khurana (Boman Irani), Kamal does not have Rs 1.5 million to pay as a bribe to get it vacated.

Kamal's younger son, Cherry, like millions of 'People Like Them' (PLTs), hopes to go to the land of opportunities, America. He engages an agent, Asif Iqbal (Vinay Pathak), to arrange for the passport and visa. Iqbal, along with the theatrical friends of Meghna (Tara Sharma), helps Cherry to get the plot back from Khurana, through street-smart antics that border on illegality.

This is where the socio-economic gap between Bhargava and Khosla shows. The former uses his knowledge and funds to build a hydro-electric power unit for the residents of Charanpur village. Cherry, Iqbal and Meghna use their street wits, backed by luck, to turn the tables on Khurana. The trio prepares papers to sell a plot they do not own to the realtor.

Until the 2000s, experts dubbed both Bhargava and Khosla as middle class. But it is the former, who is a consumer. He has the means to afford assets. It is his choice to stay back in India. The Khosla family has limited yearnings. Kamal wants to build a house – which will be his achievement. Cherry wants to land in the US, a longing that he gives up. He marries Meghna, and lives in the house that the father finally builds.

By the end of the first decade of this century, the figures to classify the Indian middle class became realistic. In 2009-10, NCAER said that it comprised 150 million people – considerably less than 450 million 14 years ago – and there were another 20 million who could be considered rich. From then on, it was a cat-and-pigeon game, as different experts, agencies, and researchers came up with their own numbers.

In 2011-12, a study concluded that only 6% of the population was middle class. Another (2012) found out that the percentage was 10%. Three years later, the Credit Suisse Global Wealth Report claimed it was a mere 25 million. In 2018, *The Economist*, in an article, *The Elephant in the Room*, calculated it at three times higher – 78 million. A 2017 piece in the *Economic and Political Weekly*, agreed with NCAER's figures of the 1990s, and put it at 600 million.

Given that India's population, as per the 2011 Census, was 1.2 billion, which went up to nearly 1.4 billion in 2021, the range of these calculations lay between 25 million and 600 million, with most converging towards 70-100 million. Such yawning extremes seemed irreconcilable. However, as we said earlier, it depended on the experts' methodology and basic assumptions. There were at least three main factors that partly explained the differences.

Some researchers focussed on incomes, and others on wealth, or disposable incomes. Those who relied on the former were unable to decipher the households' expenses on discretionary items, like a car or vacation. As Bijapurkar succinctly observed in her book, "Consumption is like maternity, a certainty. Income is like paternity – merely a matter of inference." It is clear that the two aspects cannot converge.

Wealth contained economic multitudes that were not comprehensible. For example, as the 2015 Credit Suisse report explained, wealth in any form "conforms better to the widespread view that the middle-class membership is resilient to temporary setbacks". Unlike income, one cannot lose it if one loses one's job, and the material assets that one possesses remain with the individual. Thus, someone can be an owner of a house and car, even if the person is in-between jobs.

Consumption is like maternity, a certainty. Income is like paternity, merely a matter of inference. Hence, trends based on the two do not converge

On the flip side, the inclusion of wealth, as opposed to income, in the calculations distort the figures. This is because much depends on the nature and number of assets that are included as part of any middle-class family. One survey found that a fifth of the households own three or more of these five assets – a vehicle, TV, laptop or computer, cooler or air-conditioner, and refrigerator. The percentage doubled if one took into account only two or more of the five products.

So, here is a million-dollar question: which of the above two is a better formula to estimate the size of the Great Indian Middle Class? Anecdotal evidence from urban areas indicates that the number of families that own only two – a cooler and TV – is immense. Even India Two, the serving-class defined by Kishore Biyani, can form a part of it. In fact, many of the people, who work for professionals like us, such as maids, drivers and plumbers, may even own three (including a refrigerator).

However, it is illogical to consider that India Two is the main consumption class. It aspires to goods, services, and brands. It wants to get where the professionals have reached. But it can take a generation or two to do so, i.e. until their children grab certain kinds of jobs. To include them in middle class is noteworthy, and possibly correct. But to consider them as avid and excited consumers of discretionary items, and to hope that they have considerable disposable incomes is absurd.

Yet, in a convoluted manner, sections of India Two are wealthier than India One. A few years ago, my driver, Rakesh, was offered Rs 10 million for the family property (house and farm) in Delhi's Mehrauli area. He wanted Rs 20 million, and thus refused to sell. Clearly, he was richer than I was, although my salary was 15 times his. His share from the possible sale of property in the undivided family was more than my savings, both then and now.

The second factor that leads to the numbers discord is due to the multiplication constant. As a rule, researchers look at households, rather than individual counts. Hence, it is imperative for them to consider the average number of members in a middle-class family. In most calculations, this constant is five. This creates problems, as many constituents of the neo-middle class are nuclear families, and individuals who live alone fully or partly support one or two parents.

So, there is a possibility that the use of the constant (five) may hike the numbers in some cases. But if no constant is used, and we count those who earn above a certain annual income, and own specific assets, we may come up with considerably lower figures, as we do not account for the dependents (children, parents and, in some cases, spouses). When the Credit Suisse report talks of a middle class of 25 million, does it mean a figure of 125 million, after using the multiplication constant of five?

Finally, there are issues with sub-categorization. In its earlier reports in the 1990s, NCAER was prone to divide the middle class into low, low middle, middle, and upper middle income groups. Later, in a bid to add zing, it began to call the lower ends of the subsets as aspirers and strivers. The use of these terms changed the manner in which the intelligentsia looked at the middle class. These two groups could now be legitimized as possible consumers.

Aspirers and strivers were succinctly captured in Bollywood movies. We will discuss two of them, *Tumhari Sullu* (Yours Sullu; 2017) and *Gully Boy* (Street boy; 2019). Sullu, or Sulochna (Vidya Balan), lives in Jal Padma Housing Society in Mumbai's suburb, Virar. What can be more middle-class than this? Her "placid life" revolves around a "relentless" daily cycle of "*sabji-bhaji-kapda-tiffin*". Unlike her two working sisters, she is a 12th pass housewife.

Sullu is an aspirer. This is hinted in scenes, where she finds, as a review in the *Indian Express* said, "her mojo in on-air (radio) contests of the kind which entice 'housewives' like her to participate, holding up a household appliance as a prize". The review added, "Balan is pitch-perfect as Sullu, a woman making peace with her situation, while always trying to find that silver lining. Can she get a TV instead of a pressure cooker, she asks the radio jockey on the other side of the (telephone) line."

"She finds her true calling" when she unexpectedly lands a job as a RJ. A NDTV review noted, "The job gives her a sense of confidence and achievement, but it does not inspire her to attempt a full-fledged rebellion (against her role as a house-maker)." In her professional role, said the review in *Indian Express*, she tastes a "space free of the restrictions she has lived with", and learns to "spread her wings".

It is thrilling and funny to watch Sullu "use her brains to talk (as RJ) to strange men, using a smart tightrope of being playful without lacing it with smut, which is far easier to do," said a review. According to NDTV, Sullu confides to the woman cabbie, who drives her to the radio studio and back to the suburban home that when she was home, her husband missed her, and when she began to work, which kept her out of home for hours, he got so used to the absence that he left her.

Gully Boy (Murad Ahmed; Ranveer Singh) lives in Dharavi, Asia's largest slum, where people think of themselves as middle class, and where resident businesspersons and gangsters are richer than the well-to-do and top-level professionals. His girlfriend, Safeena (Alia Bhatt), is training to be a surgeon, and *Gully Boy* nurtures a hope to become a rap musician. Murad is a striver – he works as a chauffeur, and trains as a rap artist with his mentor, MC Sher (Siddhant Chaturvedi).

According to a *News18* review, the movie was a "love letter to Mumbai – a city where the haves and the have-nots exist in a tentative sort of peace, where skyscrapers overlook slums, where you can be poor and still have integrity, and where dreams frequently come true". One isn't sure if Murad is a part of the middle class. A foreigner who visits his house comments, "Every inch has been used." A review in *The Wire* said that this reflected a sense of "self-referential, some sort of a semi-serious apology" as India is still "sold as a poor nation where people live in match-boxes".

But as one watches the film, there is no surprise that *Gully Boy* rises from being a Dharavi resident to musical fame. This is how reforms change us. A person from a deprived background is confident that she can make it big merely through talent. The movie is inspired by the real lives of rappers, Naezy and Divine, who hail from the slums and rise to great musical heights.

These lyrics from one of the songs in the film epitomize this blend of confidence and ambition, this undying belief in a liberalized, market-oriented world. Fame comes from what you have, what you make of it, and not necessarily because of the family you were born in.

Kaun bola? (Who said it?)

Mujse na ho payega. (I cannot do it)

Kaun bola, kaun bola? (Who said it, who said it?)

Apna time aayega. (My time will come)

Uttja apni raakh se. (Rise above your ashes)

Tu uddja ab talaash mein. (Fly in the search)

Parwaz dekh parwane ki. (Look at the moth's flight)

Asmaan bhi sar uthaega. (Even the sky will raise its head)

Aayega, apna time aayega. (It will come, my time will come)

One of inevitable facets of someone who graduates from a lower class into the middle segment is the fascination with brands. It is not the assets, but the universal and social perceptions associated with them. In case of a house, the address (location), size, interiors, and the name of the realtor are crucial. You don't buy any shades, you buy one of a specific style and make.

However, the meaning and importance of the same or similar products, which are made by different manufacturers, can change over time, and across generations. It's about what's in or out, what's considered as a wow factor, and what's acceptable as a fashion statement. Within a product or service sub-sector, brands die and new ones are sought after. Across products, some are in vogue now, and the consumers chase the others a few decades later.

Consider the case of the small, sleek, and inexpensive Maruti 800 car, which became a rage during the 1980s, just before the reforms, and sold millions of units for two decades. Its owners were obsessed with the model, which was revered by the middle class. Initially, people joined a long queue to acquire it, and paid hefty illegal premiums. Bridegrooms demanded it as a part of dowry, and young hipsters vroomed around town in it.

It reminds me of an old ad line for a TV model, which fits the craze for Maruti 800 – 'Neighbour's envy, Owner's pride'. Within the first few years of its launch in December 1983 – the first car was handed over by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi to Harpal Singh – it became a symbol of social status. A 2008 newspaper article claimed that it emerged as the fourth addition to the 'Great Middle Class dream' of "*roti*, *kapda*, *aur makaan*, and *meri* Maruti (food, clothes, and house, and my Maruti)".

From 1984, there was a scramble to buy the Maruti. Politicians, businesspersons, and celebrities wanted it. Researchers Kenneth Bo Nielsen and Harold White of the University of Bergen (Norway) wrote that "popular representations" and "symbolic imaginaries" were attached to it. Unlike the competing Ambassador and Fiat, which were stodgy and antiquated, the 800 could zip and zap, sway and swerve, and zigzag through urban traffic.

Bollywood captured this rage at the perfect time. *Mere Dad Ki Maruti* (My dad's Maruti) was released in 2013, a year before the model was phased out. The movie encapsulates the social symbols associated with it. The backdrop is the big fat Punjabi wedding in Chandigarh. A rich father (Rana Kapoor) purchases the Maruti to give it as a wedding gift. His son, Sameer (Saqib Saleem), steals it for an evening to impress the attractive college mate, Jasleen (Rhea Chakraborty). He loses it, and "all hell breaks loose".

As one can see, the model, with world-class Japanese technology, greater acceleration, and manoeuvrability, had an appeal across generations. In the film, the father uses it as a prop to prove his superiority in the social hierarchy. The son leans on it for romantic journeys. Like the erroneous belief that women fall for big bikes, it was believed that they did the same for Maruti.

In retrospect, the model should be the last thing to signify social and personal esteem. The sordid and shocking fact is that it was a product of corruption and political nepotism. Indira Gandhi handed over the car-making project to her younger son, Sanjay. Businesspersons, bankers, and chief ministers bent over backwards to help him.

After June 1980, when Sanjay had a fateful date with untimely death in a plane crash, the government adopted a professional approach. After a global search, it partnered with Japan's Suzuki Motor. Nearly four decades after Independence, India rolled out a modern passenger car, which was cheap. It's indeed ironic that the middle class attached a premium image to a product that was meant for the masses.

Twenty five years after the launch of the 800, Tata Motors introduced Nano, which was billed as the cheapest car in the world. The makers claimed that tens of millions would ride on four wheels, instead of the usual two-wheelers such as scooters, motorcycles, and cycles. It seemed a perfect product for the middle class. Crucially, the Nano was not involved in any scam – the renowned Ratan Tata was the brain behind it.

Nielsen and White said that the Nano was a "triumph of the determined, individual entrepreneurial spirit". It was imbued with "emancipator qualities", and Tata felt that it could democratize mobility, and lead to physical and social freedom for millions of riders. It was a product of an assertive, confident, and innovative nation, which had left behind its socialist past, and adopted a capitalist attitude. One researcher said that the Nano was a "phantasmagoria of middle-class consumption".

Yet, astoundingly, after a partial success, the middle class shunned the cheapest car because it wasn't expensive enough. In a curious turn of events, in 2011, the cheap Nano was marketed in a manner that reeked of ostentatious consumption. A "special and one-off version", Tata Nano GoldPlus, went on a six month tour across India to woo buyers. One of the researchers described the marketing event as "Auto-Orientalism", which reminded people of the pomp and glory of the East's past.

Media reports said that the Nano GoldPlus cost a phenomenal $4.5 million. It was covered with 80 kg of gold, 15 kg of silver, and studded with 10,000 semi-precious stones and gems. A jewel-encrusted peacock, the national bird, sat on the front bumper. Publicly, this car celebrated 5,000 years of Indian jewellery and craftsmanship from the various regions of the country. In reality, it was a last-ditch effort to "sell" the Nano.

Despite these antics, the model failed to capture the imagination of the middle class. It could not replicate the success of the 800. Neither the youth, nor middle-aged segments were interested in showing off a Nano as status symbol, giving it as wedding gift, or stunning their boyfriends with a spin. Within a generation, the middle class attitudes towards brands changed.

Bollywood understood the finicky nature of the consumers, who whimsically changed their buying habits, aspiration values, and desires. *Maska* (Butter; 2020) brings out the conflicts between the traditional longings, and cravings for new things – Ambassador and Fiat versus Maruti 800. *Fashion* (2008) highlights how tastes can change within a season as what's in at one time is suddenly neglected and discarded – Maruti 800 versus Nano.

Cafe Rustom is a 100-year-old 'Irani' restaurant in the posh Ballard Estate (Mumbai). It is run by a widow, Diana (Manisha Koirala), who wishes to keep her husband's legacy alive. Her teen son, Rumi (Prit Kamani), wants to sell it, and become an actor. He drifts away from the mother, and moves in with his girlfriend, Mallika (Nikita Chopra). For Rumi, the cafe is a brick-and-mortar structure. For Diana, it is filled with memories, friendships, and love.

A review in *The Week* said that *Maska* presented "two contrasting pictures of Mumbai – that of an endearing Parsi culture against the setting of an Iranian cafe", and another of the young, who think of it as an avenue to "fulfil their dreams of being a being a part of the razzmatazz of the entertainment world".

Ambassador could not compete with Maruti because the former did not appeal to the new generation. Rumi is not enthused by Cafe Rustom, and seeks another ambition, which gels with a new, emerging, though confused, India. Only towards the end of the movie does Rumi realize that they were a number of older people who still connected with the cafe. Like the Ambassador continued to impress a small section of older Indians.

When I first visited Mumbai in the late 1980s, the well-to-do areas in the southern part of the city was littered with Irani cafes. They were the haunts of the locals, and visitors like me. They were the places to hang out. Most vanished within two decades. The McDonald's, KFCs, and other western and Indian chains either took over these properties, or the owners sold them because of dwindling revenues, and the lucre of the notes dangled by realtors.

Fashion is ostensibly a movie about the transformation of a Chandigarh-based woman, whose father wants her to become an accountant, but who ends up as a supermodel in Mumbai. Meghna (Priyanka Chopra Jonas) is initially rejected and ridiculed. She grabs her chances, and strikes it big in the fashion world. Caught up in the glitz and glamour, she pays the price of fame, loses close friends, and becomes an alcoholic. She returns to Chandigarh in a broken and depressed condition.

Urged by her father, Meghna goes back to Mumbai, and picks up the scattered strands. On the crucial day, as she is about to walk the ramp as the star model, she freezes when she hears the sad news about the death of a fellow model. She overcomes the grief, and blazes across the ramp. Her career is revived, she is off alcohol, and regains her confidence. The movie ends with the supermodel Meghna walking the ramp at a fashion show in Paris.

However, a closer look at the movie reveals that it is not about Meghna's super success, and return to global fame. It is about how things change in the fashion world. Shonali (Kangana Ranaut), who is a supermodel and denigrates Meghna, descends downwards due to drug abuse. When Shonali appears in a TV show as mentally ill and homeless, Meghna rehabilitates her. It is the news of the former's death that the latter hears when she freezes on the ramp.

The consistent decline of Shonali, and the rise, fall, and rise of Meghna signifies that fashion is fickle, and so is the fame of those who are its poster girls. Those who are at the top today can take a deep dive tomorrow. The potential buyers of fashion brands – clothes and accessories – too change their minds every season – from summer to autumn to the next summer. It is akin to the life span of a supermodel, which is for a few years, and only the rare manage to survive for a longer time.

Why does this happen? Is it a peculiarity about reforms and market-oriented economies? During the 1980s, we wore similar clothes, and never bothered about accessories. There were a few brands to choose from, and each ended with similar looks. This wasn't the case since the 1990s. I now meet teenagers, who contend that if they have posted a photo in a specific dress (or a shirt or top) on social media, they are unlikely to wear it again, at least in public.

A single choice, or a world full of them, can change consumers' perceptions. In the 1980s, there were basically two car models. When the 800 was launched, it was cheap, but more importantly it had better technology, features, and specifications. Unlike the Ambassador or Fiat, its acceleration was faster, and curving radius was smaller. Buyers were starved for a better product, which could make driving comfortable and exciting.

Maruti 800 was priced at Rs 50,000, and was affordable. The price-tag kindled the pent up demand for cheaper and better cars. Who wanted to pay more for the dreary and tedious Ambassador, when the hipper, cooler, and nippier 800 was available at a lower price? The Ambassador's design and engine remained the same for decades. The Maruti was modern; it was a product of the 1980s, and not the 1950s.

Nano was possibly cheaper. Although its price was Rs 100,000 in 2008, in terms of purchasing power, it was lower than Rs 50,000 in the 1980s. But, by the 2000s, the Indian market was overwhelmed with dozens of models from foreign makers. Their prices were high, but the affordability was low due to loans and EMIs. Nano used technology which, in the case of a car as opposed to other products, did not appeal to the buyers.

Also, there was the question about performance. Maruti was way ahead of Ambassador. In the case of Nano, unfortunately, the price, and its claim about the world's cheapest car, became a stigma. Hormazd Sorabjee of *Autocar* wrote that it seemed to potential buyers "as if you (they) can't' afford anything else". Who wants to settle for a product, not as a choice, but as a financial compulsion? We may do so for a houses and clothes, but not for a car.

Existing social power structures explain why Maruti won, and Nano lost. Studies concluded that although the middle class might behave like a homogeneous whole, there was a small dominant section(s) within it that exerted greater influence on the rest of the group. This minority defined the "standards against which the aspirations of the other factions of the same class and within the same landscape are measured".

Maruti 800 gained from these social dynamics. Nano didn't. The 800 was a vehicle that epitomized the repressed revolt among the middle class against the socialist-nationalist mindset. The Ambassador was a product of protectionist and restrictive policies. Maruti was an escape for the new influencers – a possible dive into a market-oriented world.

Nano, in comparison, was a limitation. Since one could not afford a normal car, one opted for a cheaper car-like version. In a market, where choices are galore, a buyer for a car avoids a purchase, rather than opt for the second best. If I cannot buy L'Oreal, I may save money over months to buy it.

Let me end with a caveat and an insight. Sometimes, the reverse brand psychology works. Consumers may favor a local product. This explains the rise of Indian brands such as Dabur, Patanjali, Symphony, and Byju. Bollywood movies looked at this trend where the middle class prefers local brands despite the availability of renowned foreign ones. One of the movies which does it amicably is *Gangoobai* (2013).

Gangoobai lives in the picturesque Matheran on the outskirts of Mumbai, and does domestic chores at a few houses. Her obsessions include pet-plants, and long conversations with her friend. One day, when she looks at her memsahib's delicate *gara* sari, a traditional Parsi wear embroidered with flowers and birds, it becomes a life-changing moment for Gangoobai. She has to possess it, although it costs Rs 50,000. And so the determined woman sets out off for Mumbai to acquire the sari.

During her stay in the big metro, said a review in the *Times of India*, "she makes it to the elite guest list at fashion shows – in her bright colored *nauvari* and tattoo between her brows – she's styled by Mumbai's hot-shot design house, and she spiritedly lives up to the city's bustling night-life". In the process, she encounters her dream weaver, Daksha (Mita Vasisht), an employee at a boutique, Waman (Purab Kohli), top fashion model Monisha (Nidhi Sunil), and style-guru Rohan (Raj Zutshi).

"Mumbai turns out to be big but not bad" for Gangoobai, said a review in *Live Mint*, as the domestic help makes the transition from the serving class to an acquirer of an expensive and exquisite traditional brand.

CHAPTER 6

UDTA PUNJAB IN PEEPLI LIVE

The Magnificent Seven FMs, the passionate proselytizers wrongly claim that reforms help the have-nots more than the rich. The number of the poor remains high at 200-300 million. There are links between farmers' protests, MSPs, and exaggerated claims in the Budget speeches.

Movies: *Mother India* (1957); *Do Bheega Zameen* (1953); *Roti* (1974); *Upkaar* (1967); *Guide* (1965); *Manthan* (1976); *Project Marathwada* (2016); *Peepli Live* (2010); *Kisaan* (2009); *Matru Ki Bijlee Ka Mandola* (2013); *Udta Punjab* (2016)

ONLY seven finance ministers presented the full union Budgets between 1991 and 2021. This Indian financial band of 'The Magnificent Seven' spoke with vision and conviction about how reforms would ring in economic upheavals. Market policies would lead to growth, and the latter was the weapon of development to wage and win the war against mass poverty. The Budget speeches of the FMs reflected this fervor.

They were smart, and guided by electoral realities. They welded the capitalist candor with the socialist slogans. Their speeches were studded with gems like 'Reforms with a human face', '*Sabka saath, sabka vikas* (Everyone's help, everyone's development)', 'Inclusive Growth', and 'Reform, Perform, Transform'. They insisted that liberalization would help the poor more than the rich. The invisible hand of the market would pull the vast deprived sections up the prosperity ladder.

Among the seven FMs, the two passionate proselytizers were Manmohan Singh (FM – 1991 to 1996; PM – 2004 to 2014), and P Chidambaram, who presented the highest number of Budgets during his three separate stints as FM. The bhakts will include Narendra Modi, whose ideas impacted every Budget that was presented by his minions. However, each of the 36 speeches, including the five interim ones, between 1991 and 2021, showed the FMs' zeal.

Chidambaram was bombastic. In the 1996 Budget speech he said, "Growth will be our mount; equity will be our companion; and social justice will be our destination." If the poor could grasp the meaning, it was a near-perfect message. In his understated way, Manmohan Singh emphasized in the 1995 speech that "growth and restructuring are not ends in themselves".

Over the past few decades, each FM declared that his and her (yes, we had the first independent woman FM) policies enabled the poor to lead better lives than before. Data suggested that the poverty levels dwindled from a high 60%, or 500 million, in 1991 to less than 20%, or 200-250 million, in 2020. A Brookings report suggested that the figure was an insignificant 50 million, or less than 4%. The poor were definitely performing the vanishing trick.

In addition, the FMs, and the PMs (in their election speeches), claimed that a villager had access to basic amenities such as water, sanitation, health services, and electricity. Cooking gas reached her house, which saved her from the drudgery, misery, and illness of dealing with smoke. She was empowered financially and socially, and could partake in majestic welfare schemes like MNREGA. She had a mobile, and was able to surf the Internet.

Drowned in such lofty assertions, the majority of the poor in several parts of the country continued with their daily chores among dirt, debris and death. The COVID pandemic highlighted this cruel reality. When the Center imposed the first nationwide lockdown in March 2020, tens of millions of migrant laborers sought the protection of the villages. Many walked hundreds of miles, and most were wrecked by the lack of money, food, and health services. Death hovered over them.

When the second viral wave swept in an unprecedented way in March 2021, the urban lower classes faced the specter of random and arbitrary deaths. A journalist said that she compiled the names of the dead from the newspapers, and concluded that the majority were from low-income groups. But the second wave later gripped rural India like an Octopus, and literally strangled people to death in an indiscriminate and haphazard manner.

Even if we assume that the COVID crisis was unexpected, the fact remains that statistically the size of India's poor, at 200-300 million, was more than the population of most nations. Critics said that the numbers were understated. Statistics can lie, and a sleight of hand in the calculations can make the falsehoods believable. The size of the poor depends on the statisticians.

In 2015, the Rangarajan Committee defined a rural poor person as one who spent up to Rs 32 per day, or less than Rs 1,000 a month. In India, where a large loaf of bread was more costly, and the daily commute for a laborer was half of this daily expense, the hypothesis was preposterous. As expected, it led to a furore and anger. Several journalists tried to live on Rs 32 a day, and found that it was near-impossible to do so. The criterion was junked.

Related data hinted that the poor, whatever their numbers, comprised a sizeable section. Their access to potable water was hampered by dismal quality. On paper, electricity reached every village, but many were saddled with 10-20 hours of outages. Several *jugaad*-like businesses grew around power cuts. Enterprising people traveled on bicycles with portable batteries, and charged a small sum to charge mobile handsets in the villages.

Rural women had access to LPG gas and stoves, but their use was lopsided due to the government policies. While the stoves were given almost free, the families had to buy the cylinders. Although the latter were subsidized, the rural buyers had to initially pay the market price, and received the subsidy amounts in their bank accounts after weeks or months. Illiterate villagers paid bribes to the banking correspondents to operate their bank accounts.

A 2019 report by CAG found glaring instances of misuse. It observed, "Risk of diversion of domestic cylinders for commercial use was noticed as 198,000 PMUY (Prime Minister Ujjwala Yojana) had an average annual consumption of more than 12 cylinders, which seems improbable in view of their BPL (poverty) status. Similarly, 1,396,000 beneficiaries consumed 3 to 41 refills…. Further, IOCL (Indian Oil) and Hindustan Petroleum... in 344,000 instances issued 2 to 20 refills in a day to PMUY beneficiary having single bottle cylinder connection."

CAG concluded that the subsidy for the LPG connections was diverted into unrelated bank accounts. This was because the accounts of individuals, who were not the beneficiaries, were linked to the welfare scheme. This meant that the money was being transferred to people who were possibly not categorized as BPL families. Alternatively, it could indicate that the uneducated villagers had involved non-BPL middlemen, who helped them, and took a cut out of the payments.

Manmohan felt that if the industry did well, there would be no need to give subsidies to the poor. The trickle-down effect would lift them up

There is a wide gap between intentions and ground realities. The FMs knew this, but couldn't admit it. In their Budget speeches, they spun narratives that lamentably showed that neither did they learn from their mistakes nor did they gain from their predecessor's experiences. They repeated what was said before, and tried to unravel what the previous regimes wove. It was a case of one step forward, half-a-step backward, and another step sideways.

Each FM had his or her notion of how to reconstruct a new India with deep foundations in reforms. Manmohan Singh sat on liberalization's Himalayan peak, and mystically surveyed the beautiful valleys below. He felt that if industry became competitive, and integrated with the world, it would help the farmers, who would gain through lower input prices, and profit from exports. In the 1993 Budget speech, he said that "these changes (related to industry) will be far more significant... than any program of special subsidies could ever be".

Chidambaram, who was familiar with the flatter Deccan plateau and low heights of Western and Eastern Ghats, wished a judicious mix. In his first Budget speech in 1996, he agreed that 7% growth over the next 10 years was crucial "to abolish poverty and unemployment". In the next year's speech, he said that a "broad-based" growth could lead to "better standards and a humane and just society". The fight against poverty wasn't "a game of populism", but "a battle at the grassroots level".

Both Yashwant Sinha (FM – 1998 to 2002) and Jaswant Singh (FM – 2002 to 2004) looked upwards at the world from the plains, although they were energized by reforms. "I have recalled to myself the face of the poorest and weakest man I've seen, and made sure that this Budget is of use to him," Sinha said in 1998. Jaswant Singh (2003 speech) hoped to unleash the entrepreneurial spirit and creative genius of the citizens to convert the "liability of want into the asset of ability".

Pranab Mukherjee (FM – 2009 to 2012), Arun Jaitley (FM – 2014 to 2019) and Nirmala Sitharaman (FM – 2019 till now) were worried about people's aspirations. Jaitley (in 2014 speech) said that the poor "wanted to free themselves from the curse of poverty", and be "a part of the neo-middle class". Mukherjee's claim (2010): "Growth is only as important as what it enables us to do and be." Sitharaman (2019) stated that her regime's "signature was in the last-mile delivery (system to the poor)".

At every stage, FMs justified their approaches. Sinha obfuscated. In the 2000 speech, he admitted that more than a third of the population lived below the poverty line. The next year, he changed tracks and maintained that India's poverty dropped from 36% in 1993-94 to 26%. The two statements contradicted each other. It implied that the levels slumped by 3% in seven years (1993 to 2000), and by as much as 7% in a single one (2000-2001).

Manmohan Singh and Chidambaram played the smart game. During a bumper crop in 1995, the former said in the Budget speech, "Our farmers have clearly benefitted from the policy of offering remunerative prices, and have returned a strong production performance." When the crops failed, as in 2005, Chidambaram blamed the weather – "an unanticipated 13% deficiency in the south-west monsoons". In the 2007 speech, he admitted that agriculture "witnessed several ups and downs".

Some FMs held their predecessors responsible. In the 2010 speech, Mukherjee alluded that the previous finance ministers hadn't done enough and, hence, there were "weaknesses in government systems, structures, and institutions at different levels of governance". This prevented the poor to gain from the various welfare measures. Jaitley hinted the same in the 2018 speech, when he said that more than 86% of the farmers were "small and marginal", and dealt with the exploitative middlemen.

It is to Bollywood's credit that it explored poverty, especially the state of the farmers, in dozens of movies since the Independence. One of the striking issues was indebtedness, which plunges them in perpetual misery, and forces them to lose their lands to the sordid moneylenders. Two early movies, which left a deep imprint among the hearts of the viewers, were *Mother India* (1957) and *Do Bheega Zameen* (Two bheegas of land; 1953).

Mother India is known for the character of Radha (Nargis), a widow who takes charge of her family (two children), and toils on the rocky land that they own. She has the courage to shoot one of her sons, who becomes a bandit and kidnaps the daughter of the moneylender, Sukhi Lala (Kanhaiyalal). The largeness of Radha's heart is evident because Sukhi Lala exploits her family throughout the movie, and offers to waive off her loans if she sleeps with him.

However, the real message is that villagers, who borrow money for inane reasons, like Radha's mother-in-law does for the marriage, are saddled with debts for generations. This is due to high interest, lenders' crooked practices, and vested interests against the poor. The Rs 500 that Radha's in-laws borrow becomes un-payable. Shamu (Raaj Kumar), Radha's husband, has to part with three-fourths of the produce to pay the interest.

It is this unbearable burden that forces Shamu to farm more of the rocky barren land, and his arms are crushed by a boulder. Unable to bear the trauma, he starves to death, and leaves Radha to deal with the vagaries of the weather that cripple the farmers – in the movie a flood destroys the crops – and exploitation of the moneylenders that constricts their lives. The film begins and ends with Radha; at the end of the narrative, she is considered the village's mother, and is shown inaugurating a new canal.

Do Bheega Zameen, as researcher Amir Ullah Khan described in his paper, *Agriculture and the Small Farmer in India: A Bollywood Perspective*, is a "poignant story of a small farmer caught in the maze of land consolidation by the feudal system". In a seminal scene, the farmers debate the pros and cons of a system that does not allow them to own the land that they till, season after season, and for generations. Here are the dialogues that Amir mentions:

Farmer One: These people with the landlord seem to have come from the city.

Farmer Two: Then what I have heard is right. The landlord wants to construct a mill here.

Shambu (another farmer): Now this is a nuisance. This means we will have to move our farming from here.

Farmer One: Of course, the land belongs to him; he can do as he pleases with it. How can we stop him?

Farmer Two: But not all the land belongs to him – those two parts belong to Shambu, and if he does not sell, the mill cannot come up here. Shambu, will you sell?

Defiant Shambu: Huh, I will never sell my land. I will never sell my land....

Only later in the movie does the audience realize that this part-confidence, part-arrogance on part of Shambu is bluster. This is because like most farmers, he is caught between the sharp teeth of the loan shark, the landlord. In yet another scene, Shambu is called for a meeting at the feudal lord's house.

Landlord: What, such audacity. Then, by tomorrow, return the money you have borrowed from me along with the interest accrued.

Shambu: Sir, give me at least four days time.

Landlord: I have already given you lots of time. People like you don't deserve better. Get out....

Shambu: Sir, please. Sir, please....

Such pleadings became second nature to the farmers, as they beg for everything in life. This was applicable in the case of the government's welfare schemes, where corruption, black market, and unsavory elements made life hell for the villagers. For example, the fair price ration shops, where the villagers could buy food grains and fuel at cheap subsidized prices, became hotbeds of corruption, and alternative places of mistreatment.

In *Roti* (Bread; 1974), the heroine Bijli (Mumtaz), wrote Amir, "leads a group of (village) customers to the ration shop, also called the Fair Price Shop set up under the Public Distribution Scheme". The shopkeeper insists that he has no food grains and the warehouses are empty because of no rains this year and floods in the previous year. Hence, there is no production this year, and the grains were washed away in the previous one. Since this was the case across the country, there is no fresh supply.

Bijli retorts, "Aye, if you knew this, why did you take advance payments from us?" The shopkeeper delves into an elaborate global perspective. "I took the advances because I thought the Americans would send us wheat, and if they don't then our Russian brothers would. Now that they haven't, you can take your money back." Bijli warns the villagers that the grain will arrive in two days, and then the shopkeeper will sell them at double the prices.

From the conversations, an astute reader can figure out everything that was wrong, and is still is, with the Public Distribution System. The shopkeepers take advances, which are illegal, and hoard the grains, either to create artificial shortages that enable them to fleece the villagers or channelize the product into the open markets where the prices are higher. The villagers are swindled by the shops, which were meant to help them.

Despite attempts to encourage irrigation, most villages depend on the monsoons. The farmers are continuously caught in the endless cycles of drought and floods – both of which lead to crop failures. In the years when the rain gods are happy, and production is abundant, there are gluts, which result in lower farm incomes. Let us focus on two movies that deal with such issues – *Upkaar* (Favor; 1967) and *Guide* (1965).

Actor-filmmaker Manoj Kumar said that the idea behind *Upkaar* was stimulated by Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri's slogan of 'Jai Jawan, Jai Kisaan (Hail the soldier, hail the farmer)'. Bharat (Manoj Kumar) is both a farmer and soldier. In the former occupation, he benefits from the Green Revolution, which introduced hybrid wheat and rice varieties, and enabled farmers in the northern states to hike their productivity and incomes.

Guide is a story about a tourist guide, Raju (Dev Anand), who falls in love with a client, Rosie (Waheeda Rehman), the daughter of a courtesan but married to an archaeologist, Marco (Kishore Sahu). However, the climax of the plot lies in the drought in an area, where Raju is considered a holy man. Taken in by this new public image, the protagonist goes on a fast for 12 days during a drought. Against expectations, the rains arrive, and Raju dies.

Yet another theme, which has a resonance among the farmers, is the need to augment earnings through alternative sources such as dairy, horticulture, and plantations. The movie, *Manthan* (Churning; 1976), looks at the challenges in the dairy sector. Amir wrote that it talks about the "caste structures that impede the formation of cooperatives, corrupt officers, vested interests, captured markets, and the difficulties faced in uniting small dairy farmers".

The film was supported by the National Dairy Development Board (NDDB), which was a cooperative success during the White (Milk) Revolution. At that time, the feeling was that farmers could come together, and sell milk and milk products as brands, and command higher prices, just like NDDB did with Amul. However, as the movie depicts, most cooperatives are rattled by chaos and confusion, and attempts at domination by vested interest groups.

Most of these issues continue to plague the farmers. In the post-reforms era, the market-oriented policies were thought to be a panacea to deal with them. But as the policy makers, various stakeholders, and the communities realized, the more things changed in the new India, the more they remained the same. The plight of the farmers continued, and it resulted in massive agitations.

The most recent one against the three central farm acts began in 2020, and continued for over a year.

First, through ordinances in June 2020, in the midst of a pandemic and slump, and then through legislations in September the same year, the government pushed the three acts down the nation's throat. The first, which promoted one-nation one-market, eased the movement, sale and purchase of farm produce within and across the states. It dismantled the government-controlled *mandis* (markets) in several states and regions.

A second one did away with the provisions of the Essential Commodities Act, which governed several crops and aimed to dissuade hoarding, black marketing, and the unusual price spikes. This was in continuation with what the past governments did several times. The third encouraged contract or corporate farming, and opened the doors for large companies to lease farm lands, and buy the produce at pre-fixed rates.

The Center justified the three laws. It said that the first would allow the farmers to sell their produce anywhere in the country, and in markets where they were likely to get better prices. It would unshackle them from the stranglehold of the *mandi*-middlemen, who exploited them, largely in the form of lower-than-market prices.

Once the Essential Commodities Act was scrapped, the government would not regulate the distribution and prices of products. It would allow the market to take control, as was the case with the commodities that were taken out of the Act's purview earlier. Experiences proved that the market was a better way to ensure remunerative prices to the farmers. The government controls only got in the way, and did more harm than good for the poor.

Partial land reforms since the Independence made the situation more oppressive. In some cases, the big farmers found ways to consolidate landholdings. In others, when land was redistributed, the area became less productive and led to lower incomes as the farm areas were fractured over generations. Corporate and contract farming was the need of the day to hike productivity, inculcate technology, and give better returns to the croppers.

Within no time, the farmers agitated on the highways leading to the national Capital. They felt that the aim of the laws was to give unbridled powers to companies to manipulate prices and, hence, farm incomes. The acts were not in the growers' interests, but biased in favor of the companies. The farmers claimed that they would end up losing their lands because the firms would extract their pound of flesh in the times of crises, unlike the government.

A single market, for instance, will transfer the power from the *mandi*-

middlemen to the corporate representatives. The former exploits the farmers, who do not have the means to take their produce to the state-run *mandis*. This will continue despite the new act. Once private markets compete with the *mandis*, and grab higher market shares because of their financial clout, corporate middlemen can control the future destiny of the poor farmers.

Similarly, the decision to get rid of the Essential Commodities Act will help the traders, who can ship the produce to the markets, where prices are lucrative, and create artificial shortages elsewhere. As for corporate farming, despite the model contract devised by the government, the farmers will be unable to fight legal battles with the companies. Over time, the firms can tighten the screws, and engage in land grabbing.

According to the policy makers, the laws represent colossal and much-needed steps to transform the farmers' lives. They symbolize hope and change in the near future. For decades, the previous regimes promised these laws, and took small steps to move in those directions. Finally, the Center showed the political will to go the whole hog. The three farm acts signify a desire to make agriculture viable and desirable.

What the government fails to realize is that the farmers' fears are complex. They were created over the past few decades, and overwhelmed them. Since 1991, the regimes promised the same results from the policies they initiated in the same areas. As the farmers repeatedly found, the outcomes of the past measures made their lives more miserable than before. If the partial moves didn't work in the past, why will the grander ones do so in the future?

Let's look at what happened in the post-reforms decades. In the 1992 Budget speech, Manmohan Singh said he wished to start a "new chapter... where farm enterprises yield not only more food, but more productive jobs, and higher incomes in rural areas". Four years later, Chidambaram's speech talked of the removal of "controls and regulations over agriculture". There are similarities between the former's aims, latter's desire, and current claims.

Yashwant Sinha, in his 2002 Budget speech, spoke of "*Kisan ki azadi* (Freedom of farmer)". In one of his speeches, Jaswant Singh visualized a "second revolution, to follow the earlier Green Revolution". (Starting from the 1960s, Green Revolution hiked productivity and incomes of a few farmers in some states, and for a few years.) Jaitley talked of the need to shift from the nation's food security to income security of the farmers in his 2016 speech.

One-nation one-market was discussed by the previous FMs. Manmohan Singh was the first to harp on a "unified national market" without "administrative restrictions on movement of agricultural products within the country". During his tenure, Sinha advocated "free inter-state movement of food grains" to achieve a "countrywide integrated market". He allowed the farmers to sell directly to the food processors.

Concurrently, a few FMs experimented with both virtual and localized markets. Between 2016 and 2018, Jaitley expanded the e-market platform to almost 600 wholesale markets, which benefitted the tech-savvy farmers. He wanted to upgrade 22,000 rural *haats* (small markets) so that the farmers could sell locally, instead of having to go to the larger and faraway *mandis*.

Past policies also looked at dismantling the Essential Commodities Act, and expanding corporate farming. Since 1991, more products were excluded from government's control. Model agreements were designed to woo farmers in favor of contract farming. However, as was the case with the dream of a single national market, these decisions flopped.

Due to the continuation of restrictive inter-state movement, the concept of single market remained on paper. Prices of products that were not considered essential witnessed regular and wild fluctuations. During oversupplies, the farmers resorted to distress sales. In times of scarcity, the growers did not have enough to sell. Either ways, their incomes dwindled. Some farmers paid money to the middlemen to lift their produce.

Model contracts worked efficiently in some states. They harmed the farmers in the others. In Gujarat, small farmers were sued for millions of rupees by a MNC, which supplied seeds to the contracted farmers. The MNC alleged that non-contracted growers used its seeds in violation of the patent laws. In reality, the farmers used the seeds discarded by the others. Finally, the civil society forced the MNC to retract.

Hence, there is the current belief that past policies, which were subsets of the three acts, helped the companies, traders, and rich farmers. The majority of the poor and marginal farmers suffered more than what they gained. More importantly, the current system, despite its flaws, faults and corruption, works. The farmers want an improvement in the existing institutions to make them efficient and effective, rather than dismantle them.

Consider the Minimum Support Price (MSP) mechanism. At present, both the Center and states decide MSPs for a few crucial crops, and the state-run *mandis* and state-owned procurement agencies, like the Food Corporation of India, are bound to pay them. During oversupplies, MSPs act as income cushion for the farmers. During droughts, floods, or lack of rainfall, they ensure as income protection mechanism.

More importantly, MSPs protect the government from the vagaries of the market, and allows it to procure grains to augment food security. The produce is sold through PDS, and stored for calamities and disasters. Both the Center and states doled out free dry rations to millions of migrants, albeit quite inefficiently, during the COVID crisis.

However, the Center feels that the MSP mechanism has lost its relevance. It leads to excessive procurement, year after year, which impacts the fiscal deficits of the Center and states. Given the inadequate warehousing, anything between 15% and 30% of the grains and perishables are destroyed every year. Since India is comfortable in terms of food security, and can import grains for short-term needs, there is no need for MSP-related procurement.

Finally, the MSP system is riddled with corruption. Studies showed that a mere 9% of the farmers sold at MSPs, and these obviously included the rich. Less than a fourth of the croppers were aware of MSPs. The majority offloaded their produce to the *mandi*-middlemen at 15-20% discounts because they could not access the markets. Traders procured the grains at low prices in one state, and sold it at the MSPs in another one.

In private, the farmers agree with these conclusions, but are unconvinced with the Center's arguments. They reject the assurances that MSPs will continue, and *mandis* will coexist with private markets. They think that the private markets will marginalize the former. The farmers will not get MSPs, and will continue to remain at the mercy of the private traders.

What is crucial is that although croppers are unable to get MSPs, the rates act as benchmarks. The exploitative middlemen have to link their discounted prices to the MSPs. They can, at best, offer 15-20% discounts, and not more. The farmers and middlemen enjoy a 'I scratch your back, and you scratch mine' relationship. The traders offer loans and seeds to the farmers.

There are deep-rooted socio-economic reasons why farmers are scared to let go of the old system. The problems are accentuated due to indebtedness, lack of adequate incomes, fragmentation of landholdings, and' suicides. Reforms were meant to change the situation, which remained the same. The distressed farmers, therefore, resent further changes, and wish to accept the status quo.

Bollywood dealt with these frightening issues in the post-reforms period through the nightmarish cases of suicides. *Project Marathwada* (2016) traces the sordid story of a Marathwada-based indebted farmer, whose son commits suicide and who comes to Mumbai to seek government's help. The plot twists when he meets four students, who are making a documentary on suicides.

A review in the *Times of India* said, "In the world of urban poor, do we ever spare a thought for those living in drought-inflicted regions – where crops fail regularly and the peasants mortgage their lands to clear their hefty debts? How sensitive are we to their abject poverty and hapless situation?" The review reflected the gruesome reality in liberalized India.

In the real world, Marathwada and Vidarbha in Maharashtra witnessed one of the highest numbers of suicides. A 2020 paper, *Farmer Suicides in Maharashtra, 2001-2018*, said, "An analysis of data reveals the relationship between farmer suicides and issues such as monsoon failure, water shortage, drought, absence of social security, robust crop procurement mechanisms, and increasing debt burden."

Another 2019 paper said that crop failure due to drought and lack of access to irrigation was the primary cause for suicides in Marathwada. The second was high indebtedness. Others included a drop in socio-economic status, addiction (alcohol), and huge expenses on marriages. The respondents in the study claimed that remedial measures were viable prices for farm produce, and timely loans at low interest.

Peepli Live (2010) is a spoof on farmers' suicides. It is an insight into how deaths fuel media frenzy to grab TRPs (viewership), enable journalists to abrasively compete with each other, and allow politicians to use them for electoral purposes. The lives of the families, which undergo the trauma, do not change. The suicides become statistics in official records and academic papers.

Two brothers, Natha (Omkar Das) and Budhia (Ragubir Yadav), the residents of Peepli village, waste their money on alcohol. The bank asks for loan repayment, and warns that their land and house will be appropriated. Budhia and village headmen advice Natha to commit suicide as it will force the bank to waive off the loan, and pressurize the state to pay compensation. Natha wonders if his death can save his family, which comprises mother, brother, and sister-in-law and her three children.

Events spin out of control when a local hack, Rakesh (Nawazuddin Siddiqui), overhears the brothers' discussion, and files a report. Given its sensational nature, the news is picked up by national news channels. There is competition among rival media companies to scoop Natha's interview.

Given that elections are due in the state, the ruling party wants to prevent Natha's suicide, and tries to bribe him. The opposition party feels that the death will give it an electoral edge. The village headmen kidnap Natha to seek ransom. The barn, where he is kept as a captive, burns down. A body is found, but it is of Rakesh, the local reporter. But the state government mistakes it for Natha's, and refuses to pay compensation, as he has died in an accident.

In the end, Natha is alive, and works as a daily-temporary construction laborer in the suburbs of Delhi. His family loses the land to the bank. Neither the media nor politicians care about Natha and his family. Things go back to normal, and will remain so until another journalist reports another suicide. The farmers-media-political circus will start again.

Suicides, or attempted ones, are shown as reactions to indebtedness and loss of land in other movies. *Kisaan* (Farmer; 2009) links the deaths to the pressures to sell farms for industrialization and urbanization, like in *Do Bheega Zameen*? In this century's version, farmer Dayal Singh (Jackie Shroff) sends his elder son, Aman (Arbaaz Khan), to study law to help fellow farmers to resist the local zamindar's cruel antics.

After he graduates, Aman returns to help his father and younger brother, Jiggar (Sohail Khan), to fight realtor Sohan Seth (Dalip Tahil), who wants to buy the land and convert it into a commercial place. As tempers rise, Jiggar is jailed for five years, despite Aman's legal defence. Jiggar returns to find that the villagers' lives, including his father's and brother's, have changed.

Half of his father's body is paralyzed; Aman is married, lives in the city, and works for realtor Sohan. Several farmers commit suicide, even as Aman puts pressure on his father and others to sell their farms. Only when Aman's wife is killed by Sohan's goons do the two brothers join hands to take down the tycoon. The movie ends with Aman and Jiggar in their fields, under the watchful eyes of their recovering father.

In *Matru Ki Bijlee Ka Mandola* (Matru's Bijlee and her Mandola; 2013), the villagers sell their lands for a Special Economic Zone (SEZ). The plot involves four characters – ambitious widower-businessman Harry Mandola (Pankaj Kapur), his educated (LLB) driver, Matru (Imran Khan), and a corrupt and depraved politician, Chaudhri Devi (Shabana Azmi). There is Mandola's Oxford-returned daughter, Bijlee (Anushka Sharma).

Harry dreams to transform the village, Mandola, named after his family. He wants to acquire land, and give it to the state to build a SEZ. Devi decides to help only if he marries Bijlee to her son, Baadal (Arya Babbar), so that she can grab the businessman's wealth. Bijlee and Baadal are in love. Matru, an idealist and a revolutionary, is influenced by China's Mao Tse Tung.

Caught in the middle are the villagers. Their hopes are on Matru, who advises them, and there is the looming shadow of Mao from whom they receive messages on red cloth. (Only later do the viewers realize that the posts were secretly sent by Matru, who did not want to risk the loss of his job.) Upset by Baadal's intent to help his mother's dastardly actions, Bijlee helps the villagers, and falls in love with Matru.

The stage is set for the 'Big Fight' – Harry, Devi and Baadal versus Matru, Bijlee, and the villagers. An unpredicted rain storm wrecks the crops. The farmers, who expect a bumper crop that will enable them to repay their loans to the state-owned bank, and still save money, are shattered. They have no option but to sell their land to the state to settle the debts. Matru and Bijlee are in no position to change the course of the events.

Of course, Bijlee and Baadal are about to be married. Everything seems lost. There is one possibility. If Matru can get Harry drunk, a solution can emerge. When the latter is inebriated, he undergoes a change in ideology, and bats for the villagers. In earlier scenes, an intoxicated Harry encourages Matru to carry on the fight to prevent the sale of the land. The plan works; Harry is drunk, he calls off the wedding, and agrees to an alliance between Matru and Bijlee.

Post Script: *Udta Punjab* (Flying Punjab; 2016), touches upon the unintended consequences of Green Revolution. The film depicts several issues related to reforms. First, let us look at what it shows, and then we can flesh out what it hints at. A *Times of India* review said that Punjab, a state known for wrestlers and wheat, and five rivers, serves up heroin and opium, and is "besieged by cartels, cocaine, and corrupt cops".

Punjab is a hub of addiction – researchers claimed that 80% of the youth in rural areas were under the influence of narcotics due to large-scale unemployment, and influx of migrants, who took over agriculture jobs. Westernized culture afflicted the society, which is evident from the global popularity of Punjabi pop and rap. In the movie, characters indicate the Punjabis craze to go abroad, and speak in English. A police officer says "Sissidi", which is how a Punjabi pronounces CCD.

Another character is singer Tommy Singh (Shahid Kapoor) who, "has the words 'Momma Da Boy' tattooed under his clavicle, and a sticker saying 'my guitar' on, well, his guitar. He is labelled-rebel, a work of successful branding in a land where pop music is not merely alive but routinely mainlined by famished audiences, and clueless kids look up to him as a messiah". A *Times of India* review said that he is a "junkie masquerading as Alpha male, who can only make music when he is "coked up" to his eyeballs".

However, these premises fade away in front of the one that isn't explored. In the recent past, researchers traced Punjab's addiction to Green Revolution. During the initial decade, it revolutionized the lives of some farmers as incomes shot up due to higher productivity. But it stagnated as costs went up; the new high-yielding varieties of wheat and rice seeds required expensive inputs in the form of fertilizers and agri-chemicals.

Mechanization, which was preferred by the large farmers, led to higher use of water, electricity, and diesel. To manage expenses, and shore up profits, Punjab allowed the inflow of cheaper migrants. Local affluent families sent their children to pursue higher studies. The educated second generation sought lucrative non-farm jobs, which didn't exist. This led to unemployment, even as farm profits dwindled.

CHAPTER 7

JAB WE MET IN SWADES

The jobs conundrum – how to reconcile the two trends that there are more jobs due to the invisible hand, and eras of no-jobs and less-jobs. There are other contradictions – the mysterious case of vanishing women labor, and women empowerment due to MNREGA.

Movies: *Sonali Cable* (2014); *Jab We Met* (2007); *Queen* (2014); *Corporate* (2006); *99.9 FM* (2005); *Dev D* (2009)

IT is an incongruity. It is a paradox that we can't comprehend. Reforms, we believe, let loose incalculable breaks in the job market. Existing firms, which are on a tight leash under socialist or communist rules, are freed from their chains. There is competition, which intensifies and spreads as new sectors, hitherto limited to state-owned units, are opened up. People feel confident to become their masters, and opt for self-employment and entrepreneurship.

At the same time, as the market defines the destiny of businesses, and the state withdraws its overbearing support, crises and cycles become a part of our lives. In bad times, firms slash jobs; the people are the first ones to get hurt as companies cut costs. The use of technology, urge to run tight ships, and the pressure to deliver higher profits each quarter force the corporate sector to extract more from the existing employees, and put a lid of sorts on new hires.

We have witnessed this interplay in several generations. Low Hindu rate of growth in the 1970s led to high unemployment. It was the educated class, the graduates and post-graduates, who were unable to find suitable jobs. Higher growth in the 1990s created new avenues to earn more, and in respectable jobs. As I remarked earlier, people in their twenties earned more money – and owned more assets – than what their parents did when they retired.

Once we entered this century, there was a long period of jobless growth, i.e. an era of no jobs, which was followed by years of negative employment, i.e. a period when unemployment zoomed. In 2018-19, the unemployment rate was the highest in the previous four decades. When the COVID virus led to the new normal, one in every four willing workers was in between jobs, or twiddled her thumb at home (and not because of work-from-home).

Let us study the trends in specific sectors. The IT boom in the 1990s and the first decade of 2000s boosted the careers of millions of people. Experts predicted that it might solve the employment problems. But it reached a plateau. No one now mentions software as a lucrative option for a job-seeker. Media went through a worse upheaval. The plethora of TV channels, radio stations, and newspapers fuelled new jobs in the 1990s. This was followed by shorter periods when they vanished.

So, reforms act like a double-edged sword. They cut through the red tape, slice through the growth inefficiencies, and sculpt the policies that create several islands of prosperity. These tend to expand and enhance jobs. However, at the same time, reforms act as inherent brakes; during crises, when companies need to remove their feet from the accelerator, the economic vehicle slows down due to friction. There are no smooth liberalization rides. There is the possibility of job losses.

What is, however, intriguing and inexplicable, in fact frightening, is the growing trend of vanishing labor force, as opposed to jobs. A huge percentage of the working population isn't interested in work; it shuns jobs. This is visible across age groups, in urban and rural areas, and across socio-economic strata. More importantly, it is prominent among women, although a sizeable number of men have no compunction to stay at home, and while away their time.

Between 2005 and 2018, the number of women in the 15-59 age group, who actively sought jobs, plunged by 20%. During the same period, the number of females in the middle-aged bracket (30-59 years), who were content with household work, zoomed from 46% to 65%. Only a third of them was either employed or interested in a job. The horrible fact was that a tad under three-fourth of rural women remained out of the labor market in 2018. The percentage was a higher four-fifth in the case of their urban counterparts.

Compare the figures with other developed and developing nations. The percentages of women participation in the labor market are quite high in the western world – Switzerland (80%), Japan (73%), and the US (68%). A blog by Deepa Krishnan stated that they are getting better in nations like Bangladesh, where the percentage shot up from 24% in 1991 to 36% in 2017. It is unbelievable that in this aspect, India finds itself among the bottom 10 nations, with only nine in the Middle East and Africa below it.

The situation in some of Indian states in the north and east is abysmal. In 2017-18, rural women's participation in the workforce was an implausible under-4% in Bihar, and 14-15% in Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Punjab and Haryana. The latter two are progressive states in terms of economic growth. Even Bihar and West Bengal have shown promising growth rates.

Since the women aren't interested in jobs, the unemployment rate among them in rural areas is statistically low – 1.5% in Uttar Pradesh, 1.7% in West Bengal, and 2.3% in Bihar. Similarly, thanks to the lack of the inclination to work, female joblessness in rural Punjab and Haryana hovered around 10% in 2017-18. When it came to urban areas, unemployment among women in West Bengal, Bihar, and Uttar Pradesh is lower than the national average.

(Unemployment is the percentage of the jobless, only among those who aspire for jobs. If you don't you are not statistically without a job.)

Every reader has anecdotal evidence to back the above data, especially about women who are not interested in work. I too have such stories, and my favorite one is about a friend, who worked as a brand manager in several foreign firms. She quit the regular job, decided to try her hand as a consultant, which gave her free time. She ended up without work. She claims that this is deliberate, and she is happy. She can enjoy, travel, and do her own things.

Social, cultural, and economic factors are responsible for these gloomy trends. A discerning reader will recognize that the issues are complex, and the causes have varying effects across and within regions, communities, and age groups. The same reasons can have both positive and negative impacts. The Indian context is different from the scenarios in other nations.

Economist Claudia Goldin explains that as household earnings zip upwards, especially when the male member(s) gets a high-paying job, the women "withdraw from the workforce". But as reforms enable women to get better education, attractive jobs, and higher salaries, and lead to breakdown in cultural norms – they tend the "join the workforce". This is the income-substitution effect with a U-shape curve.

While the negative income effect is evident in India – women opting out of jobs – the upward portion of the curve isn't. One of the reasons is that married women, after they take a sabbatical, don't find jobs that either fit in with their wishes or pay well. Despite high growth, the preferred white-collar jobs declined in the post-reforms era. Stephen Klasen and Janneke Pieters contend that this leads to "crowding-out effect", as men grab scarce positions.

An ADB study (2019) stated that men "access a greater proportion of emerging occupations in India". They seize the opportunities in sunrise sectors. Another research showed that less than a fifth of the jobs in the 10 fastest-growing sectors were snatched by women. Also, women, who take a break, are insecure about their former colleagues, who may get promotions and climb up the corporate ladder.

"Across both rural and urban locations, and for all years, women with secondary education had the lowest participation rate (in the workforce)," concluded a recent ILO study. Those with minimal schooling or higher studies were more interested in jobs. The former are under pressure to augment family incomes, and the latter find it easier to get jobs as per their preferences.

Recent research ascribed this to the "rising marriage market returns". Klasen and Pieter believed that within the mid-education segment, schooling improves the marriage prospects. They are married to men, or into families with higher education levels. Since the objective is to find a better match, rather than a job, such females stay out of the job market. Post-marriage mobility restrictions in certain communities add to the negative effects.

Although it is intuitive to assume that educated women are more likely to seek work, technology proves to be a bottleneck. Mechanization of farming, and commercialization of allied segments like poultry and animal husbandry, displaces women, who are replaced by men. Similar changes in the manufacturing and services sectors "affected women disproportionately". According to McKinsey Global Institute, 12 million Indian women could lose their jobs due to technology by 2030.

At the social level, there is some stigma against working women, and enhanced status is attached to non-working ones. "Families take pride when female members withdraw from work, demonstrating that male members can provide a comfortable life for the family," said academician Mitali Nikore. Women are considered as secondary earners.

In a few castes and communities, females with 10-15 years of education – essentially schools – are, said one study, "valued for their ability to manage domestic tasks that require literacy such as schooling children, and many of these women feel more productive devoting themselves to these responsibilities than working outside the home". On an average, women spend 10 times more time than men on household work.

In several rural surveys, most women claim to be either directors or CEOs. This seems unusual and normal. Economists contend that the designations are a "fancy-sounding way" to describe personal (single-person) enterprises (without other employees). Some studies stated that a third of these directors and CEOs were "unpaid family workers", who helped in family businesses.

Others spent their spare time in self-help groups (SHGs) and cooperatives. In both cases, they acted as mentors, either because of their age or experience, and were paid minimally. Their efforts, while commendable, did not reflect full-scale entry in the job market.

Unfortunately Bollywood movies rarely capture the women's decision to opt out of work. Hindi movies focus on the entry of females in occupations that were hitherto restricted to them. More women broke the glass ceiling in the private sector, and attained new heights, even though their overall representation remained low.

Mercer, a global HR firm, found in a 2012 survey that many Indian companies focussed on gender-related issues as a part of their objectives to enhance diversity and inclusiveness. While 61% of the respondents claimed that they had programs to mentor women, more than a third said that they pursued family-friendly policies.

Dell Women's Entrepreneur Network, which includes employees across nations, is a part of the hardware maker's business and moral initiatives to look at women as employees, entrepreneurs, and consumers. A senior manager explained, "Women are making up more of the decision makers and buyers.... Those corporations that embrace diversity, whether (related to) age, gender, geography (and) experience succeed."

Dozens of Hindi movies projected women in their new roles as earning members, who sometimes were more successful, and made more money than their spouses. The heroines were independent and confident, ambitious and pushy in their careers, and influential enough to sway the destinies of the men. These women were more equal than men, not just in economic term, but in social and personal esteem.

Sonali Cable (2014) portrays the David versus Goliath business wars in the post-reforms digital world. As foreign and local predators aim to become giants, they gobble up the smaller players. As tech start-ups become popular, it becomes a fad for the small fish to be eaten by the whales and sharks. But some of the smaller firms fight back, and emerge as winners.

Sonali Dattaram Tandel (Rhea Chakroborty), a small-timer who provides broadband services, slugs it out against the powerful Boss Waghela (Anupam Kher). A movie review said: "Whether it is malls eating into the business of local *baniyas*, studios muscling out smaller firms from the multiplexes, or multiplexes pushing out single screens out of the game, in the wake of independent businesses struggling to survive in big cities owing to corporate giants' rising dominance, Sonali Cable comes at the most opportune time."

In *Jab We Met* (When we met; 2007), Geet (Kareena Kapoor) is the protagonist, rather than her lover, Aditya (Shahid Kapoor). In the first half, she shows her confidence when she runs away from home in pursuit of love. The depressed businessman, Aditya, learns from the feisty and bouncy Geet.

Once her love is rejected, Geet is despondent and heart-broken. But she doesn't return home, and finds a job to start a new life, which seems to be the opposite of her true nature. When she returns home, she is daring enough to kiss Aditya to fob off the guy, who wants to marry her. Overall, she is the new woman born in liberalized India, and shaped by reforms. When Aditya launches a mobile model, he names it Geet.

Unlike the double transformation of Geet – from a lively person to despondent one, and back to the former self – Rani (Kangana Ranaut), the protagonist of *Queen* (2014), undergoes a one-way makeover. A shy, meek and sheltered woman becomes a free-spirited one in the wake of a personal crisis. When her fiancé walks away, Rani embarks on a trip, which was booked for her honeymoon, to Paris and Amsterdam alone.

During her travels, she befriends the Paris-based Vijayalakshmi (Lisa Haydon), a woman of French-Spanish-Indian descent, shares a hostel room with three foreign men in Amsterdam, and strikes a companionship with a pole dancer. The heroine drinks champagne, kisses a stranger, and rejects her fiancé when she returns the engagement ring.

"Back in 2014, *Queen* was a feminist fantasy that seemed like a great aspiration fairytale, but in a lot of ways too good to be true. Then, I turned to travelling to 'find myself', and just like Rani, a bunch of transient relationships... became my companions in that life-altering quest. Cut to 2019, an eventful life and multiple adventures later, *Queen* transcended the fairytale status and became a story that resonates with my life experiences in ways few other things can," wrote Runjhun Noopur in an analysis five years later.

It added, "Before I set out to travel, it was easy to dismiss the parallel world of *Queen* where solo women travellers stayed in co-ed hostels. It was even easier to dismiss the idea of finding male roommates who were warm, friendly, safe and respectful – strangers in foreign lands who became better friends than the ones you spent a lifetime with. And yet, as I discovered, few bonds can match the ones we forge when we travel."

Unbridled and naked work ambitions among women were explored in *Corporate* (2006) and *99.9 FM* (2005). In the latter, Gautam (Shawar Ali) is a radio jockey for a Mumbai-based radio station. He is rejected by Sonali (Dipannita Sharma), and marries Kim (Raima Sen). Years later, he meets Sonali, the old love rekindles, and now the new lover urges him to divorce his wife, and marry her. Gautam kills Kim.

When he confesses to Kim's murder to Sonali, she breaks off the relationship. Gautam is arrested and sentenced to death. The night after, the radio show that he hosted on 99.9 FM has a new presenter, Sonali. The viewer is left with a dizzying thought – did Sonali plan the events that led to the murder and death sentence? A reviewer sarcastically wrote, "Nothing is 100%," in the movie.

Corporate is about a no-holds-barred rivalry between two business groups. A sub-plot shows that the unadulterated desire to become big in the corporate world afflicts women. Nishi (Bipasha Basu), a VP in Sehgal Group, uses her charm to steal product secrets from Pervez (Sandeep Mehta), CEO, Marwah Group. When her company is in trouble with the regulators, she becomes the fall girl, and takes the blame.

Obviously, Nishi is swayed by the promises from her owner-boss that she will be released from jail once they 'fix' the inquiry commission. And the hints that she will get bigger and better managerial responsibilities. Nothing is further from the truth. The foes patch up, Nishi rots in prison. Two years later, she is still fighting her case – alone and with a child whose father is dead.

India's women are social influencers. In *Swades*, Gita (Gayatri Joshi) and Kaveri Amma (Kishori Ballal) persuade Mohan (Shah Rukh Khan) to leave his US job with NASA, and settle down in India. They pressure him to transform from a tech professional to social entrepreneur.

But the two women in *Swades* are both similar to, and different from, the two heroines in *Dev D* (2009), one of the numerous remakes of the old Devdas. "Debutante Mahi Gill (Paro) is no Bollywoodized *phoolkari-dupatta*-wearing ingénue: she dresses, moves and behaves like a feisty girl who's been born and brought up in sugarcane country in rural Punjab," said a review in *Indian Express*. She isn't "mere putty", who will go through "emotional *atyachaar*" in the name of love.

In Dev D, Paro is raw and sensuous. Chanda raises the "lust-meter as high as any red-blooded male can handle. But both are heart-stoppingly alive"

Paro, wrote a blogger, sends nude photographs to her lover, Dev D (Abhay Deol), and has a "pronounced sexuality". The hero cannot accept her "wild sexual adventurism which sees her cycling to the neighboring fields at the break of dawn with a mattress meticulously rolled up on the carrier for a clandestine tryst with him" – and spurns her. Not to forget the scene when an angry Paro "starts out on the hand pump".

The other woman, Chanda (Lenny; Kalki Koechlin), goes through a shocked childhood after her sexual MMS became viral and "sent the nation in a lustful tizzy" – aka the MMS scandal that gripped a student of Delhi Public School a few years ago. Disowned by family, she becomes a sex worker. "The first (Paro) is raw and sensuous, the other (Chanda) raises the lust-meter as high as any red-blooded male can handle, but both are heart-stoppingly, blatantly alive, needy, looking-for-love-with-sex-as-a-by-product real girl-woman."

However, the women such as Paro, Chanda, Nishi, and the two Sonalis do not capture the real-life impressions that changed the state of women in myriad ways. We examined the negatives impacts in the job market earlier. Now, let us look at the positive impact related to it.

MNREGA is a nationwide welfare scheme – the act was passed in 2005 –

and it ensures minimum work for both males and females. The Act specified that the poor should get at least 100 days of work at state-determined wages. This opened the doors for women, who earlier stayed out of job market. Since there was no gender disparity in wages, females could earn 2-3 times more.

Researchers documented the lives of MNREGA women. Lungibai of Sirohi district (Rajasthan) admitted that her family allowed her to work outside for the first time. This was because of the proximity (within the village), and safety. The upside: Lungibai could, for 100 days, leave the daily chores, and earn money. She was a productive asset, although there is a growing debate that home-makers need to be paid too.

MNREGA helped Bejni Devi to stay back in her village. She said that without the scheme, she would have had to "migrate with my four-month child", along with her husband. Each year, in specific seasons and for particular reasons, millions of families migrate. MNREGA enables the women and children of these families to remain at their homes.

This had other economic impacts. Higher costs of farm labor in some states, like Punjab and Himachal Pradesh, forced landowners to employ the cheaper migrants. Thereafter, like in Himachal Pradesh, apple growers shifted to labor from Nepal, which was more viable. Such changes, and work opportunities, nudged the Indian migrants to seek new avenues. Labor from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh trekked to faraway states in the south and west in greater numbers.

When rural families migrate, the women and children (teenagers) don't always get work in the urban spaces. MNREGA gives them work choices in their villages. Today, women account for more than 50% of the annual person-days of work under the scheme. And they refuse to migrate.

Although the MNREGA wages are not as high as those in the cities, the former's purchasing power is higher due to lower costs of living in the villages. More importantly, the MNREGA incomes accrue to the women, whose husbands are away. Several studies indicated that the combination inculcated financial empowerment and "bargaining power among the rural females.

An article by Subha Mani on www.ideasforindia.in, which talked of the bargaining power, and other research works, concluded that the women took personalized decisions on how to spend their earnings. Some surveys showed that they kept their wages with themselves. They became "individual workers in their own right", and did not consider themselves as "secondary workers".

MNREGA women admitted that their "allocation of the financial resources" depended on them. Some women said that the extra cash enabled them to "buy rations in bulk at cheaper rates", as they negotiated better terms with local shopkeepers. Others repaid family loans, and purchased medicines for the elderly. A few enhanced their incomes when they used the earnings to purchase sewing machines, and better farm equipment and inputs.

This led to the "bargaining effect". In a 2013 study, researchers found that the allocation of "collective" resources in families "depended on the "bargaining power or weights attached to the preferences of the members of the household". These weights were determined by their independent incomes. MNREGA helped women to have greater say in the household allocations.

A significant impact of this was the higher expenditure on the children's education. Studies found that MNREGA women insisted that their kids spend more time and years in schools, which hiked enrolment rates, and reduced dropouts. The impact on the girls was higher, and it was more evident among the poorer households. In Andhra Pradesh, the girls not only spent more time in schools, but their grades were better, and their mothers increased the expenses on books and stationery.

MNREGA women insisted that their kids spend more years in schools. The impact was higher among girls, and more prevalent among poor

Jean Dreze and Ritika Khera, in a 2009 study, found that 38% of the surveyed women accepted that MNREGA helped them to send their children to schools. In 2012, Laura Camfield and Uma Vennam spoke to a Sarpanch (village head), who admitted that the welfare scheme hiked the number of families that sent their children to schools. Such families also chose the "good schools in towns", rather than rely on the low-quality local ones.

As more kids went to the schools, the extent of child labor and child migration came down. "Anecdotal evidence from Rajasthan suggests a 20% reduction in the incidence of migration amongst children... but there is a lack of empirical evidence," wrote N Burra in a 2006 study.

Experts felt that the cause-and-effect between MNREGA and girl education is linked to the less-time factor. With the father away in the city, and mother busy with MNREGA work for a few months, the latter seeks choices to leave her daughter in a safe place. For young children, schools offer a chance to do so at minimal costs. Once the mothers are convinced, they are encouraged by social factors, like progressive image, to send the kids to better schools.

However, some researchers believed that this may be an additional factor, rather than the main one, due to two reasons. First, if the less-time theory was true, the enrolment of both boys and girls had to go up. The impact was more visible for girls. Higher enrolment had to influence girls below five years, who are more dependent, and hail from families that lacked support systems (grandparents). This too wasn't evident.

What is surprising is that the work-substitution effect did not kick in. If the father is away, and mother is busy with MNREGA work, one expects the girls to be burdened with house work, which reduce their ability to attend schools. Despite the additional pressures, and the need to balance work and home, the mothers prefer to send their daughters to schools.

MNREGA aimed to tackle income paucity and starvation among the poor. Its scope expanded during crises and calamities, as it was during COVID. It is a part of the inclusive growth strategy, which hopes that the poor will prosper and partake in development. However, it leads to women empowerment, enhances their bargaining power, and helps in girls education.

CHAPTER 8

CHAK DE INDIA, MS DHONI

Huge MSD dosages are injected into cricket and its administration, which lead to commercialization. Telecast rights attract billions of dollars. The dressing room changes as players hail from small states and towns.

Movies: *Lagaan: Once Upon A Time In India* (2001);
Chak De! India (2007);
MS Dhoni: The Untold Story (2016);
22 Yards (2018)

THE plots of two movies, which were released six years apart in the early part of this century, were based on settings in vastly different centuries. One related to the India at the end of the 19th century, and the second to the reformed and liberalized nation at the turn of the 20th. *Lagaan: Once Upon A Time In India* (Land tax: Once upon a time in India; 2001) explored the struggles as Indians warred with the colonial rulers. *Chak De! India* (Get up, India; 2007) was about an individual's self-respect and nation's glory.

Lagaan is based on historical facts. Farm tax, in the form of payment of a large percentage of the cropper's produce, was a crucial revenue source for the British. It was excessive and exploitative. Farmers had to pay it during droughts and famines. One of Mahatma Gandhi's protests after he returned from South Africa was against this tax that was forced on famine-hit farmers of Kheda district (Gujarat). After four months, the rulers capitulated, and asked only the rich cultivators to pay it.

It is 1893. Hit by the failure of monsoons, the villagers of Champaner wait to plead with the local Raja to exempt them from the tax. One of them, Bhuvan (Aamir Khan), ridicules the ongoing cricket game. Stung by it, the captain of the Company's team, Andrew Russell (Paul Blackthorne), places a bet – cancellation of the tax if the village team beats the British in cricket. The challenge is accepted, and the plot unfurls over 22 yards and 224 minutes.

Chak De! India is based on the story of Mir Ranjan Negi, India's hockey goalkeeper. When Pakistan, scored seven goals against India in the 1982 Asian Games finals, he faced national abuse, was charged with taking bribes, and dubbed a traitor. Later, he became the goalkeeping coach for the women hockey team, and India won the gold in Asian Games (1998). He left and returned as the coach. We won the gold at the Commonwealth Games (2002).

In the movie, India plays Pakistan in the World Cup. The latter is up 1-0. In the dying minutes, Kabir Khan (Shah Rukh Khan), the Indian captain, takes a penalty stroke. He misses, and faces the allegations that he threw the game because, as a Muslim, his sympathies lie with Pakistan. The suspicions are fuelled when the Pakistan captain shakes hands with him after the match. Seven years later, the vilified Kabir becomes the national coach for the women's team. Against all odds, India wins the World Cup.

While these similarities between real and reel events in the two movies are known, what is missed out is the socio-economic context. In the 19th century, and early parts of the next, Indian freedom leaders, including the radical ones in Bengal, battled with ideas on how to unite the caste-divided society, and inculcate nationalist ideals in it. After Gandhi came back in 1915, he was among the first to achieve this objective.

Under captain Bhuvan, Lagaan XI is a complex mix of players from various castes. The team comprises a blacksmith, woodcutter, poultry farmer, and potter; the occupations are linked with castes. There is a farmer, an ex-sepoy Sikh, doctor, fortune-teller, and a mute drummer. There is the Dalit, *Kachra*, who is called *Firki* because he can spin the ball, thanks to the polio hand.

Clearly, it is not a Village XI, but a closeted National XI (India XI), which takes on Empire XI in cricket. The players are not there for the love of the game, or to uphold the Victorian spirit. They are at war, and they represent soldiers. Everything is fair in love, war and cricket – the British cheat and corrupt the Indian side to achieve victory.

By the end of the 20th century, one witnessed the rise of a new India, which embraced reforms and liberalization, and was ready to become the next economic superpower. Experts said that India and China would drive the 21st century, which was dubbed the Asian Century. The nation was on the move, and so were its citizens. All that was needed was for the caste- and class-ridden people to rise above the age-old social divisions.

Kabir Khan's team is divided by racial and regional prejudices. Rani (Seema Azmi) and Soimoi (Nisha Nair) hail from the Tribal villages in Jharkhand. Komal (Chitrashi Rawat) is a villager from Haryana. Mary (Kimi Laldawla) and Molly (Masochon Zimik) belong to the ethnic states of Mizoram and Manipur, respectively. Bindiya (Shilpa Shukla) and Preeti (Sagarika Ghatge) are from the middle-class families.

Coach Khan has to bring the players together, and make them realize the '*niyyat*' (intention) to play for the country, and not for their personal and parochial interests. He is revolted when the players introduce themselves by their states. Kabir wants them to understand that they represent India. The team spirit emerges when the women brawl with eve-teasers at McDonald's. The coach realizes that this is the turning point; his team acquires '*niyyat*'.

Hence, the two movies deal with nationalism in sports. The players transcend the social subversions, and compete as Indians. They finally nurture patriotic dreams – to defeat the colonial rulers, and push the country at the top of women's hockey. This happened across sports in reality too, especially in the past few decades.

Nowhere is this trend more visible than in cricket, which was an elitist sports, and remained so for a century. The first first-class match was played between the British and Parsis in 1892. The game was dominated and influenced by the colonial rulers, Maharajas and Kings, and families that were wealthy and politically powerful. The scenario remained the same post-Independence, and the stranglehold loosened slowly.

Several statisticians in the recent past said that the turning point in the game came during the 1990s. Since then, a higher percentage of the national cricketers hailed from the small towns, rather than cities, and from a larger number of states. The big cities and a few dominant states lost the hegemony, concluded the two studies by Madhusudan Ramakrishnan (2017), and Ashish Magotra and Anand Katakam (2018).

Four states – Maharashtra, Gujarat, Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka – accounted for more than two-thirds of the national cricketers in the 1950s and 1960s. The figure dipped a bit to 62% over the next two decades; only Andhra Pradesh replaced Karnataka. Since the 1990s, the four states (Karnataka having replaced AP) produced less than 50% of the country's cricketers.

Maharashtra deserves a special mention. In the 1950s and 1960s, it gave India more than a third of its Test cricketers – a notable 36%. This skidded to less than half, or 16%, after 1990. Of course, the old 'Little Master', Sunil Gavaskar, was replaced by the new one, Sachin Tendulkar. But non-Maharashtrians entered the dressing rooms in greater numbers.

When one looks at the urban origins, Mumbai remained on top. It was the birthplace of 45 of the 292 Test cricketers, or more than 15%. Delhi overtook it only in the 2000s, when its contribution rose. The five metros, including Hyderabad, made up 41% of the Test players in the 1950s and 1960s, which went up to 48% over the next two decades. Only since the 1990s did the figure diminish to 39%.

Ranji Trophy, the domestic competition, reflected this. Mumbai, which fields a separate team in it, won the cup 22 times between 1950 and 1980, and three times over the next decade. The win percentages are 73% and 62.5%, respectively. Since 1990, it won it 11 times, with a percentage of 37%. Between 1950 and 1990, nine separate teams won it. Since then, 12 have done so. Certain cricket-related centrifugal forces were at work in the past few decades.

The Indian Premier League (IPL) can be another indicator. This is because the eight city franchises – at one time, there were 10 – recruit players from across the country, and allow more players to be on their rolls. The larger numbers give a better idea about their origins.

IPL cricketers from most states are from the small towns and rural areas. Only in four – Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu – did the big cities contribute up to 50%. These states dominated Tests until 1990. The data indicates that the power centers shifted from the in-field (specific cities and states) to the outfield.

From the 1990s, several movies based on real cricketers, and other sportspeople, epitomized this democratization. People from humble, non-city settings reached the pinnacle of their games. The players' personal lives were ruptured, parents were against their passions, and they faced ignominy even after international successes.

Most of us know about *MS Dhoni: The Untold Story* (2016). Cricket is the opium of the masses, and during Dhoni's career, India, along with other cricketing nations, was on a perpetual MSD high. Like LSD, he was the miraculous drug that gave his fans pleasurable hallucinations, extreme mood swings, rapid heartbeats, and a distorted sense of space and time. He also plunged his supporters into bouts of anxiety and paranoia.

We were exuberant and felt blessed, when 'Captain Cool' took us to dizzying heights. During his reign, India reached the top of Test rankings, and won the three international trophies in the shorter formats – World Cup Twenty20, World Cup ODI, and Champions Trophy. Our moods were dictated by whether he won or lost; we expected him to win each time he walked on the field. Our space-time world turned hazy and fuzzy, if India lost, like it did in the 2015 and 2019 World Cup ODIs.

Millions of Indians felt their ECG graphs fluctuate dangerously each time MSD executed grand finishes, dispatched bowlers to the boundaries with helicopter shots, and gave us glimpses of the brilliance behind the stumps through unorthodox antics. He was unruffled most of the times, even when he tried heart-stopping tactics, like giving the last over to an upstart Joginder Sharma in the 2007 Twenty20 finals against Pakistan.

In the context of this book, what is important is not the heights that MSD captured, but where he came from. The movie shows that he is the son of a pump operator, who waters the cricket practice ground in Ranchi. Despite his sensational talent – he is selected for the state's Ranji Trophy team – he works as a railway ticket collector at Kharagpur (West Bengal) station. Only later does he become a full-time cricketer.

During his tenure as the captain – even before it – India's dressing room underwent a drastic change. More players came from the smaller cities and towns, and from underprivileged backgrounds. The Pathan brothers, Yusuf and Irfan, could not even afford a bicycle, and practiced with a cloth tape tied to an old ball. Harbhajan Singh's father starved himself so that his son could play, and the 'Turbanator' ran a small auto parts shop that earned enough to get his five sisters married.

The 2014 movie on Mary Kom, the boxer, shows that she is the daughter of a rice farmer. Her career begins when she finds a pair of gloves in an air crash. An angry father asks her to choose between family and boxing, and she opts for the latter. After she becomes the world champion in 2006, she gives up the career. She shuns a job as a police constable as she feels she deserves better. She returns to the boxing ring, and wins the world championship again.

After his father dies when he is two, Budhia is sold by the poor mother to a travelling salesman for Rs 850. When he is maltreated, she gets him back with the help of a local judo coach. The 2016 movie on Budhia shows how the coach discovers his running abilities. Once, when the child is punished, he is asked to run. The coach forgets, and finds him still running after five hours. By the age of four, Budhia completes 50 marathons, and is the world's youngest marathon runner.

Something changed in sports, especially cricket, in the 1990s. More players came from small towns and humble backgrounds., thanks to reforms

But what's unique about Dhoni, Kom, and Budhia? Since Independence, the country has had sportspeople from the little-known corners, who have earned laurels. More importantly, what is so special about 1990? Why did the cricket statisticians use it as the reference point, the turning point? Were there new factors that gave rocket-like thrust to the sports democratization process in the 1990s? Are they linked to reforms and liberalization?

As far as cricket is concerned, our statistical milestones will be 1971, 1983 and 1991. India's first Test and series win at home was against England and Pakistan, respectively, in 1952. Similar wins overseas came in 1968 against New Zealand. But cricket aficionados remember India's twin tours to West Indies (five Tests) and England (three Tests) in 1971. In both, we won 1-0, the first time we beat the two powerful teams, including the former colonial masters, on their soils.

The diminutive Gavaskar stood upright and tall against the West Indies, as he amassed a massive 774 runs, with four centuries, in his debut series. Dilip Sardesai added another 642 runs with three centuries. It was a Mumbai show

– both, along with skipper Ajit Wadekar, were from India's financial center. Bhagwath Chandrasekhar's '*firkies*' – his bowling arm was affected by polio, like *Kachra*'s in *Lagaan* – and his 6-38 in England's second innings won India the third Test during the series.

The members of the twin tours became household names. Until 1975, only seven cities had TV links, and there were no live telecasts. During the Tests, we were glued to radio. We took transistors to schools, and used earphones to listen to the commentary. The wires ran through the inside of the shirts or coat sleeves. When we were caught, the transistors were confiscated.

However, a greater spike in the popularity of cricket and cricketers came in 1983, when India won the World Cup ODI. Kapil Dev's Devil XI received a bigger reception. We were the world champions, and we beat an unassailable Clive Lloyd's West Indies in the finals. We watched the matches on color TVs, which were available since the 1982 Asian Games.

Cricket became commercial. The 1983 team members received cash awards and rewards, gifts, and promotions by the companies that employed them. A few appeared in TV advertisements. The sport became lucrative; there were higher emoluments in Ranji Trophy.

By then industrialists like MA Chidambaram, and politicians like SK Wankhede and NKP Salve entered cricket administration, and controlled the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI). Hence, business, politics, and cricket converged. The new administrators spread the growing largesse to loyalists. The state associations supported them.

A popular sport, backed by commercial interests and politicians, is likely to attract gamblers and, of course, match fixers. Since the 1980s, these nefarious characters wooed players at every level, including club cricket. They gave cash and gifts to the players who gave stellar performances.

These trends reached Himalayan heights in the post-reforms period. As the government freed the private sector from the socialist clutches, and opened up sectors that were reserved for the state-owned firms, the bang was felt in several areas, including those that remained untouched by the liberalization waves. Media was among the latter. For example, even after reforms, TV broadcasting was under the monopoly of the state-owned Doordarshan (DD).

However, things changed once live and recorded images of the First Gulf war between the US and Iraq in the early 1990s entered Indians' offices, public places (pubs and restaurants), and bedrooms. They whetted the appetite of the viewers. Private broadcasters, enthused by TV's potential, pioneered the launch of satellite channels. Since up-linking from the country wasn't allowed, thanks to DD's terrestrial monopoly, they did it from foreign lands. They used the available spaces on global satellites to beam the unregulated signals.

Enterprising entrepreneurs flung cables over poles, walls, roofs, and trees for the last-mile connectivity between the satellite signals and TV households. They did it first in the big cities, and then in the small towns. This revolutionized TV distribution, and helped the newcomers to sidestep DD's terrestrial control. The number of TV households with cable connections boomed, and gave a fillip to live sports telecasts.

Cricket was among the biggest beneficiaries. This paved the way for an unstoppable era of 'Cricket Commercial', which was later described by phrases such as 'Cricket Entertainment', 'Cricket Spectacle', and 'Celebrity Cricket'. The developments made the game wealthy – players, administrators, advertisers and sponsors, broadcasters, and others were drowned in the ensuing riches.

It signalled the start of an alternative MSD age, which was linked in bizarre ways to the Indian skipper. The acronym also stands for the three cricket Tsars, the administrators who made and unmade the game in the past few decades. They were Modi (Lalit), the brain behind IPL, Srinivasan (N), who ruled BCCI like an overlord, and Dalmiya (Jagmohan), who initially commercialized cricket.

The trio broke down the existing system, and rebuilt it, not just in BCCI but also in the International Cricket Council. It added an eye-popping and dazzling veneer to cricket, which bamboozled the TV audiences. It benefitted sections of the viewers, who saw cricket as a means for fun and delight. The audience loved the glitter. But the three also dismayed those who revelled in the game's skills and glorious uncertainties. The purists went insane, and blamed the game's problems on the trio's bad MSD trips.

Dalmiya, who lorded over Cricket Association Bengal (CAB), and later BCCI, was entranced by the Tsunami-like airwaves that disrupted live telecasts. In 1992, when politician Madhavrao Scindia was BCCI's president, the Board sold the telecast rights for the India-England series to TWI. DD, which used to ask BCCI to pay to telecast matches, was caught in the middle of the wicket, and way out of its crease.

The next year, CAB auctioned the telecast rights for the forthcoming Hero Cup. DD's offer was rejected; TWI was the winner, and it promised to pay a minimum $550,000. DD and the Center decided to play aggressively against CAB. But the former duo knew that the weather was cloudy, and the ball could seam both ways. At the start of their innings, they walked away from the pitch, and went to the courts.

Supreme Court settled for an interim drab draw. It allowed TWI to show the Hero Cup games, and only the matches. The telecaster could not focus the cameras on the crowds. Imagine watching any sport without the bustle and buzz of the spectators. The magic of live telecasts lies in the oohs and aahs each time a wicket falls or a boundary is hit, painted faces, and the chaos and confusion in the stands.

However, after the interim order, the stage was set for more nerve-wracking legal wrangling. We sat on the edge of our seats. DD fought valiantly to retain its monopoly. CAB insisted that it could sell the rights. The socialist mindset tussled against market freedom. The situation was volatile; the Indian subcontinent was the host to the 1995 World Cup ODI, and its rights were sold for $10 million, or 20 times the figure for Hero Cup.

Finally, in 1995, the apex court gave its order. It balanced the arguments from both sides. To appease DD and the Center, it stated that while CAB and BCCI could organize series and tournaments, they could not operate permanent or temporary TV stations to air them. This implied that winning private telecasters like TWI could not set up their cameras and the production infrastructure at the various venues.

More importantly, the SC stated that airwaves were "public property" and meant for "public good". The right to use them was not enshrined in the Constitution's freedom of speech. Only the government could decide on the citizen's right to use the airwaves for the latter's interests. In a way, the government monopoly on airwaves was upheld, at least in the realm of making policies that had to be in public interest.

What cheered CAB and TWI were the court's contentions that the Telegraph Act was outdated and the country needed new laws that allowed citizens to exercise their 'freedom of speech'. A state monopoly was unacceptable, and this caught DD on the wrong foot. Until the new laws were framed, the government had to deal with telecast rights from private citizens on merit, with an eye on public interest.

Over the next few years, public interest became the defining phrase for the telecast rights. In some cases, the rights were auctioned to private parties, but DD was allowed to show the matches with the former's logos. But as private broadcasters gained more viewers than DD, thanks to the cable revolution, the state's monopoly weakened. Once the new broadcast and cable laws were enacted, DD's domination vanished.

Cash infusion in cricket went through the roof. The amounts involved in telecast rights skyrocketed. Sponsorship and advertising followed, as well as endorsements. Cricketers became brand ambassadors, and BCCI monetized anything and everything – from logos on shirts to in-stadia advertising. India emerged as the new epicenter of the game, thanks to its money power.

Enters Lalit Modi! Within a few years, he hogged the limelight. He took Dalmiya's commercial instincts to a new level, and put profits at the center of the game. His IPL vision was about how to earn more money. One of the important ingredients was to woo viewers – and advertisers – by converting cricket into an entertaining spectacle.

Modi sold everything related to IPL, which was launched in 2008. The eight city franchises raked in more than $700 million. The telecast rights went for a billion dollars for 10 years, which was hiked the next year. Sponsorship and advertising flourished, especially when TRPs zoomed. Even the time between deliveries served as ad spots, and the games were screened live in theatres, outdoor locations, pubs, and restaurants.

Women and youth became the focus audience. IPL could be understood by non-cricketing viewers. All it needed was the fuel of entertainment, which came via celebrities, industrialists, cinema superstars, live music, and glitzy and wild evening parties. Media was roped in, and went overboard in its coverage. People were glued to the games.

A decade later, in 2018, IPL telecast rights were sold for $2.55 billion for five years. It was a huge jump from the billion dollars for 10 years in 2008. Some of the players earned more during the 45 days of the league, compared to what they did for an entire year. The contract amounts shot up. No longer did the cricketers have to play for the country. As long as they were purchased by the IPL teams in televised auctions, they could make millions every year, and for several years.

Srinivasan used the BCCI's burgeoning coffers to dole out patronage. During his stint as BCCI president, and other positions, he consolidated the votes of the state cricket associations. Hence, the money earned was generously given to the state officials, who lined their pockets, and also built stadiums and academies to popularize the sport in their respective regions.

The 'S' in MSD ensured that the Indian voice emerged as the loudest in ICC, and forced the latter to agree to a new vision of the game. The superior teams could play each other more often to woo audiences, advertisers, and telecasters. He twisted the ICC's arms to share more of its profits with the BCCI, as India had the largest cricket audience. Some of these changes were rejected after Srinivasan was legally disgraced.

We know about the charges against Dalmiya, Modi, and Srinivasan over the past few decades. Bribes, illegal commissions, match and spot fixing, illegal drugs, sexual harassment and orgies, influencing umpires and team owners, and betting and gambling – nothing was left out. The issues were discussed in the media, and argued in courts. The investigative agencies were involved, as they were in the late 1990s during the earlier match fixing allegations.

Such charges and degradation of the game will be explored in the next chapter. To end this one, it is pertinent to mention a movie, *22 Yards* (2018), which highlights these trends through the story of the rise, fall, and rise of the suave, ambitious, and slick sports agent. Ron Sen (Barun Sobti) combines passion for cricket with his intuitive knowledge about business.

In one of his dialogues, he says that he handles everything a player does, except his play – endorsements, advertisements, interviews, and social media presence. In real life, the agents control and manipulate the younger and not-so-savvy players. They are responsible for the how the fans perceive the players, who follow the agents' commandments.

Ron's success is a source of jealousy for his competitors. He is accused of being a part of a betting scandal, and discredited. His clients desert him. This is when he does what a modern agent rarely does. He spots a talented, but down-and-out cricketer, helps him regain his confidence, and enables his re-entry into national cricket.

CHAPTER 9

THE FIXING IN JANNAT

Inflows of dollars, digitization, and decimation of underworld's businesses boost betting and match fixing. Gambling is mafia's new manna due to the opening up of the economy. Mumbai blasts and terror aid the trend.

Movies: *Jannat* (2008); *Azhar* (2016); *Iqbal* (2005)

Bets

and bribes, cheats and fixers were the foundations of cricket in England. They were the norm, and not the exception, in the 18th and 19th centuries, wrote Mario Rodriguez. Author Rev James Pycroft quoted an insider in his 1851 book, "You see, sir, matches were bought and matches were sold, and gentlemen who meant honestly lost large sums of money…." Honest players were incited to 'fix' because the sponsors and organizers of the games, and team members, did the same.

During the 1878-79 England's tour to Australia, the tourists alleged that there were "professional betting men in the pavilion". *Cricket*, in its first edition (10 May, 1882), wrote, "Indeed, bookmakers seem to be among the chief patrons of the game, as is, perhaps not unnatural where the line between gentlemen and players is almost non-existent to the naked English eye." The article added that two Englishmen were bribed during the tour. A third refused, and disclosed the nefarious conspiracy.

Right from the beginning, the two dominant cricket nations were embroiled in such charges. There were players on either side who played for money. Even the legendary WG Grace straddled both the professional and amateur boats, and did not shy from being paid for his skills. Some of the sponsors, organizers and captains worried about victory. The feeling was to win at any cost, which was visible both before and after the infamous 1932-33 England-Australia 'Bodyline' series.

The laws of cricket, which we are so familiar with, were written to manage disputes between the teams and gamblers. Fair bets and wagers, and minimal cheating by the host teams were the spirit behind these initial rules, which remained unchanged for more than a century.

This happened in the 19th century, the Victorian age, when cricket became a gentleman's game. "Where in the eighteenth century it had been branded by the more godly and civic-minded as 'not only improper but mischievous', in the nineteenth it came to be regarded as beyond reproach. The cricketer, once little above the apes, was now closer than men to the angels," wrote Eric Midwinter in his biography of WG Grace.

Muscular Christianity insisted that cricket and other sports were substitutes for the "lusts of the flesh". English public schools spread a new gospel. "Only through games could 'fortitude, self-rule, public spirit – measure in victory, firmness in defeat', be taught", explained Midwinter. When Thomas Hughes published *Tom Brown's Schooldays* in 1857, its success elevated sports and cricket to the highest pulpit of salvation, the lofty "embodiment of fair play".

Despite efforts in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries – and in the present – to rid cricket of the evils of betting and fixing, there were periods when they were rampant. Their existence was not in doubt. Betting was not restricted to the upper levels of the game. It started at the lowest one – club cricket in the English counties, Australian states, West Indian islands, and Indian cities – and graduated upwards.

Until the 1980s, when I played club cricket, albeit in B and C grades, one saw the plump, middle-aged, and loud bettors, who sat in the corners of the grounds in New Delhi during club matches. Many were brazen enough to put cash in the pockets of the players. This was aimed both to show their appreciation, and woo the players into their rackets.

Club coaches abused senior players for throwing away the matches, and accused them of earning illegal incomes. These cricketers included those who played in Ranji trophy, and were knocking the doors to enter the national team. For schoolboys like us, they were the local heroes; in those days, we didn't catch the significance of what the coaches said.

Some of the players I practiced and played with during the late 1970s became notorious two decades later, when their names were mentioned in the CBI's interim report (2000) on match fixing. During the post-match discussions in those days, one heard murmurs about Test cricketers being involved in fixes and bribes.

In its 2000 report, the CBI stated that organized betting through cartels started "only after India's triumph in the 1983 World Cup. This was the period when live telecast of matches featuring India, both at home and abroad, started on a regular basis." By the late 1980s, added the report, betting became "more organized, and a number of bookies spawned in major metropolitan cities". Many bookmakers had their grounding in "betting at horse races".

However, the trends got a massive boost in the 1990s, thanks to reforms. The broadcast and cable revolutions, initially illegal and later regulated by laws, led to an increase in viewership. The number of TV and cable households catapulted. The number of matches, especially the ODIs, went up dramatically, even as India's performances brightened. ODIs were attractive to professional bettors, and those who gambled for fun.

Once BCCI (and CAB) sold the telecast rights in the early 1990s, live telecast zoomed. Unlike the placid, lethargic and bureaucratic DD, which had a monopoly over them, the new buyers of the rights were interested in profits, and thought of ways to reach a larger audience. Telecasts became attractive, and TV commentary became professionalized.

According to the CBI report, the telecom innovation in the form of mobile helped the betting circuit. Bookies and punters were "no longer dependent on P&T lines (landlines) and could therefore be more mobile". They could be flexible, and change their locations easily to escape the police. It became difficult to trace the culprits.

"Bombay (Mumbai) emerged as the main center for betting, followed by Delhi… Calcutta (Kolkata), Chennai, Ahmedabad, and even smaller district towns. Bombay took the lead… since the odds on which the bets were placed… throughout India were determined by the bookies based in Bombay," stated the report. The range of bets expanded.

CBI, which was dubbed a caged parrot by the Supreme Court, failed to recognize another facet of reforms, which boosted the betting racket. This was the decimation of mafia's traditional businesses. Mumbai was the epicenter of these illegal dealings, and the most powerful mafia don, Dawood Ibrahim, resided there. He, like others, had to seek other avenues to keep afloat.

James Astill, in his book on cricket, reforms and corruption, wrote, "The opening up of the Indian economy has been a bigger blow to the underworld, leading to the collapse of their smuggling business. It had also led, more gradually, to the gangsters being pushed out of Bollywood." Yet another area that witnessed the partial exit of the mafia was real estate, where the commercial realtors became powerful.

Reforms slashed Custom duties, and freed trade policies. The mafia, whose mainstay was illegal inflows of gold, textiles and electronics, suffered as the price differentials between legal and illicit imports dwindled. The highest profits were in gold, which was smuggled from the Middle East. "Until gold imports were freed up post India's economic reforms, gold smuggling built up the fortunes of well-known gangsters" and it was "portrayed as a profession of choice for the villains in many Bollywood movie(s)," noted a piece.

In the pre-reforms era, Dubai and UAE emerged as the nerve-centers for hawala trade, i.e. illegal global transfers of cash from and to India. Since India imposed restrictions on the flow of foreign exchange, and the rupee's exchange rate was artificially pegged against other currencies, Indian immigrants used the mafia-managed hawala to send remittances back home. The rates were attractive despite the commissions.

The immigrants paid in dollars and pounds to the hawala traders in their respective countries, and the formers' families were paid in rupees in India. The underworld mopped up the Indian currency from those who wished to send their black money to foreign bank accounts in tax havens. Foreign exchange collected in Dubai and other Middle East locations was partially used by the hawala traders to convert illegal rupees into dollars, and partly to finance smuggling of gold and other products.

Double devaluation of the rupee in 1991 corrected the exchange rate. It became lucrative for immigrants to send money through banking channels, as their families received more rupees for the same dollars. Illegal imports dried up due to cuts in Custom duties, and Indians found faster, and semi-legalized, ways to launder their black money through willing banks and middlemen. In a jiffy, hawala trade was ruined.

Real estate in India was one of the largest generators of black money in the pre-reforms period. Both buyers and sellers understated the prices, and up to 70-80% of the amounts were paid in cash. The sellers saved the high taxes on their incomes, and the buyers hid their money sources and reduced the payment of registration charges.

Lower import duties dismantled Mafia"s smuggling activities. Rupee devaluation ruined the hawala trade. Betting and fixing got a boost

In several cities, the mafia part-financed land deals. Through benami contracts, it funnelled profits to own residential and commercial complexes, apart from taking over properties through forcible evictions. Construction was financed through mafia loans, which earned high interest rates. The entry of commercial realtors reduced the cash payments to an extent. Home loans and credit culture forced the buyers and banks to show the real estate transactions in a transparent and legal manner.

Financing of Hindi movies was another mafia business that was busted, although more slowly, due to reforms. Films were not recognized as business, and the filmmakers could not borrow money from banks, or raise cash from the stock market. They relied on mafia money and moneylenders.

Haji Mastan, a don who ruled Mumbai in the 1970s and 1980s, and partnered with others, had links with Bollywood. He financed movies and, according to a website, "produced films starring his mistress to promote her fledgling cinematic career". It added, "The link between Bollywood and Indian organized crime is as old as India itself." Mafia heads were seen at movie parties and social gatherings.

Initially, reforms forced a better fusion between mafia and movies. One of the reasons was that entertainment, along with TV viewership, took off, as the middle class followed its urge to spend more on discretionary items. Apart from theaters, films were aired on cable channels. The music industry exploded due to curbs on piracy, and the growth and expanse of music channels on TV. NRI audience expanded.

Studies showed that the 1990s witnessed a slew of Hindi movies that were "geared" towards "South Asian diasporic audiences". They portrayed "post-Independence emigrants as protagonists and heroes, making a radical shift from the dominant cinematic conventions of representing 'foreign returned' Indians either as traitors (for abdicating their responsibilities) or as ludicrous characters (for becoming excessively westernized)."

Even the songs in NRI-centric movies indicated that being Indian was "mobile and not tied to geography". The NRI films, and songs, proved to be huge hits within the Indian diaspora in the US, Canada, the UK, Middle East, and East Asia. This represented extra profits in the form of dollars and pounds for the moviemakers. Obviously, the mafia was attracted by these new sources.

While more films were financed by the underworld in the 1990s, extortion escalated as the earnings of the movie stars, producers, directors, and music companies rocketed upwards. This led to violence, which was evident from the murder of cassette king, Gulshan Kumar of T-Series, in 1997. Two shooters pumped 16 bullets into his body, and one grazed his temple. The reason: he refused to pay the second installment of the Rs 100 million extortion amount demanded by Abu Salem, who was Dawood's lieutenant, and is now in prison.

During the 1980s and 1990s, film stars caroused with the mafia dons, especially Dawood. Actors Anil Kapoor and Salman Khan were seen with him, and so was actress Mandakini. According to asianetnews.com, the heroine was "rumored to be in a relationship with Dawood Ibrahim". She was 16 when she entered Bollywood, and possibly "Dawood's influence got her in the films". Mandakini denied these speculations.

"According to reports, there was an event hosted by Dawood Ibrahim, where many Bollywood celebs made their presence felt. Govinda, Mehmood, Anu Malik, Jackie Shroff, Anil Kapoor, Kumar Sanu, Ranjeet, Farah, etc! Bollywood music director Anu Malik has even made a special song on Dawood. Actor Sanjay Dutt has been linked to him and served a sentence due to his connection in 1993 Bombay bomb blasts. Dawood Ibrahim's daughter, Mahrukh Ibrahim, was married to the son of Pakistani cricketer Javed

Miandad in 2005," added the article.

But the trend reversed towards the end of 1990s, as Bollywood corporatized itself. This became prominent when movie-making was declared as an industry in 2000, and moviemakers could resort to loans. The latter's dependence on illegal money reduced, and the nexus between movies and mafia began to unravel. This was the last nail in the underworld's coffin, as it gasped for breath, and tried to stay afloat.

Non-reforms factors further fragmented the mafia. The 1993 Mumbai blasts, which were financed and coordinated by Dawood, forced the governments to destroy the dons, who enjoyed political, judicial, and business loyalties. Dawood and others fled, and sought refuge in Dubai, Singapore, and Pakistan. By default, their Indian fiefdoms were divided among the smaller satraps.

From their faraway and new global bases, the overlords picked up the pieces to consolidate businesses. They entered new areas, and expanded in those where global presence and networking was crucial. These included narcotics, which hooked Indians in the 1980s, and gun-running, which became a rewarding engagement after Sikh and Kashmir militant movements. Terrorism was added to the illicit menu.

Cricket emerged as the mafia's manna in this milieu. With the growth in live telecasts and number of matches, India's improving performances, and cricket's commercial successes, cricket gambling boomed. Mafia strengthened its control over the massive racket, which became more organized. Dawood's gang became the kingpin. It set the centralized odds used by the gamblers to place bets not just in India, but across the world.

The sky was the limit for the gambling industry, especially when India played Pakistan at neutral venues like Sharjah. Given the emotions, animosity, and interest among the viewers, the betting amounts surpassed expectations. With his initial headquarters in Dubai, Dawood managed the illegal activity. Even the diaspora in the US, Europe, Middle East and Asia used the D-Company's odds to lay their bets.

It wasn't an easy journey for Dawood. As the Indian mafia fractured, and broke into subsets after the 1993 Mumbai blasts, there was competition among them. This translated into attempts to fix matches, and players' performances. If a syndicate knew how the match would progress, it could earn super profits at the expense of the hapless punters.

Sometimes, the war between the syndicates spilled on to the streets. In his book, Ed Hawkins wrote that Sharad Shetty, a key aide of Dawood, was shot 20 times in a Dubai residential area in January 2003. The kill was ordered by a rival, Chhota Rajan, who wanted his foot in the betting racket door before the World Cup ODI scheduled in the same year. Shetty was the brain, and the illegal banker, behind Dawood's betting empire.

Like a multi-headed snake, match fixing casts its poisonous shadow over cricket. Bookies and punters brazenly manipulated matches for the syndicate(s). We are familiar with the sensational details of the CBI report, which led to bans on Mohammad Azharuddin, Ajay Jadeja, and Manoj Prabhakar. Some later got a clean chit from the courts. Cricketers from Pakistan, Australia and South Africa were involved.

Hansie Cronje, the former South African skipper, emerged as one of the cricketing topdogs for the fixes. Phone tapping by CBI, and Cronje's admissions, revealed that he cajoled teammates to throw away games, and kept in touch with the gamblers. He died in a mysterious air crash which, many alleged, was the mafia way of ensuring his silence – forever. Cricket fans across the world were stupefied as their heroes went down like nine pins.

Cricket associations in the cricket-playing world expressed shocks and stated that they would have zero tolerance towards corruption. Cricket reforms ensured that ICC's Anti-Corruption and Security Unit (ACSU) emerged as the tool to keep the bookies away. The BCCI took evasive and corrective action to appease the viewers and critics.

Other changes took place due to the spread of the Internet, mobile, and digital culture. Now gamblers, who bet on the mafia-given odds, could access legal global betting sites. They could also compare these odds to the ones set by the mafia. The underworld, thus, had to not only compete with each other, but the thriving legal sites, to grab market share.

On the positive side, T-20 became the craze in this century, especially after India won the Twenty20 World Cup in 2007. This was a simpler and swashbuckling format. The game finished in a few hours. Hence, viewership exploded. T-20 was also tailor-made for betting and fixing. The odds changed every few minutes, or in less than a minute, and made betting more exciting, nail-biting, and nerve-shattering.

After the launch of the IPL in 2008, the mafia was ecstatic because it provided a perfect setup for fixing. There were so many irrelevant games in the league, which could be thrown away by the better teams without consequences. Also, the points system allowed topsy-turvy turn of events at regular intervals to retain audience interest.

The above-mentioned developments transformed the nature of the fixes, odds, and the working of the syndicate(s). With the ACSU in operation, match fixing initially reduced from its high levels in the 1990s. It was now difficult to manipulate five or six players in a team, including the captain, which is required to fix results. In the aftermath of the CBI report, players wanted to stay away from the bookies.

Hence, match fixing partially gave way to spot fixing, i.e. influence specific events like number of runs scored in an over. T-20 was the best platform for spot fixes as singular events could radically change the odds and, many a times, the course of the games. Like a few overs with 15-20 runs each at the beginning or end of an inning.

Similarly, bookies were comfortable with 1-2 batsmen in their pockets. If a hitherto successful batsman got out cheaply, the odds for his team's win would plummet. This would enable the fixers, who knew about the event in advance to place their bets accordingly.

Spot fixing shifted the spotlight to shuffle the ever-moving odds in T-20, and not the final results (though it was ideal if one could do both). As Hawkins explained, this ability of the mafia to know how the odds would swing in the near future, gave them the status of betting gods. They could place their bets one way, with the knowledge of crucial future events, and force others to do the opposite. And then the odds would move.

More importantly, with just 1-2 corrupt players, the cartel(s) could control at least four future events in a match. Of course, T-20 was T-20, and the knowledge of a few future events, or how the odds would change, wasn't enough. But the probability favored the spot-fixers.

Finally, the fixers realized that they could 'fix' the legal betting websites. Although the former had to link their odds with those of the latter, the criminals could influence them. Apart from the math, the odds change on the basis of the bets and money. The cartel(s) could rip apart the initial odds on normal sites by placing large legal bets.

These factors converged with IPL's popularity. According to Delhi Police, the average betting amount in any of the league's game was Rs 1.5 billion. It was higher in other crucial matches.

After the IPL's betting and spot fixing scam in 2013, which involved team owners and players, Delhi Police claimed that the betting syndicate was headed by Dawood Ibrahim, who was involved in "fixing performances of players and also the rates of betting". Young cricketers, who hailed from poor families and small towns, were especially prone to inducements such as expensive gifts, cash and women.

Violence, or the threat of it, was used to "settle disputes connected with payments as well as to intimidate players who failed to perform after accepting gifts/girls/money", stated a report on the scandal by the Justice Mudgal Committee. Money transfers to the beneficiaries were through hawala, which re-opened after decades of being in the doldrums. It "opened up a huge avenue of making windfall gains for this syndicate".

However, the minority report by Nilay Dutta, one of the three committee members, maintained that Dawood continued to decide the "initial betting rates for each match" despite the growth of legal sites. Only as the match progressed did the illegal odds move "closer towards the rates which actually reflect the real status of the match". It was in the initial phases that the "bookies of D(awood) Company make huge profits".

Many readers will wonder that if there is a mismatch between the odds set by illegal cartels and legal websites, why will we bet on the former's odds. The answer was explained in Nilay's report: "The rates fixed by D-Company have credibility as a large number of matches/sessions in cricket matches are fixed by them and therefore they need not reflect the actual betting market sentiments observed and followed world over by gamblers who access a huge number of websites, which are legal in their host countries such as Betfair."

Such drama, theatrics, colorful crooked characters, and shady going-ons should have prompted Bollywood to make movies on the subject. But this isn't the case. *Jannat* (Heaven; 2008) is about a bookie, Arjun (Emraan Hashmi), who becomes a match fixer for a don, Abu Ibrahim (Javed Sheikh). The latter's name is, not so coincidentally, a mix of Dawood Ibrahim and Abu Salem, the former's aide who was arrested in Lisbon with his lover, Bollywood starlet Monica Bedi.

One of the little-understood aspects of the film is that Arjun meets Abu in South Africa. This is significant for two reasons. In 2000, South Africa's Cronje became the face of the cricket corruption. In 2003, South Africa, along with Zimbabwe and Kenya, was the venue of the World Cup ODI. It was during the tournament that the mafia changed its direction – from match fixing to spot fixing. In 2011, this was confirmed by none other than Lord Paul Condon, the former ICC's ACSU chief.

He said that after the unmasking of Cronje in 2000, "the game was in a meltdown, sponsors were walking away, demanding their money back". In the 2003 World Cup, which was Condon's first major tournament, "wholesale fixing" was eradicated, but spot fixing became rampant. In one of the matches, he claimed, "two guys (batsmen) suddenly went from scoring runs in double figures to just ones and twos".

Six years later, IPL was shifted to South Africa – were the *Jannat* writers prescient? – due to security reasons and national elections. In the same year, Javed Miandad, the former Pakistan skipper, alleged, "There is a definite smell of match fixing coming from the IPL, where strange things are happening. I don't consider the IPL as cricket, it's a joke. It is strange that players who are not regular bowlers have taken hat-trick in the league. Teams are losing matches from winning positions."

Statistical analyses tested Miandad's charges. One of them stated that "in the IPL 2009, compared to the ICC World Cup Twenty20 2007, more teams were winning matches from positions they shouldn't win. There's only 1.6% likelihood that such a big difference could be explained by chance alone." In IPL 2009, there were seven matches, where a team lost from a strong position, and "there was just one such unusual match in the 2007 World Cup", when Zimbabwe upset Australia.

Either deliberately or by default, *Jannat* highlights important features of match fixing. These include the role of the bookies, their links with mafia, and South Africa as an important center for corruption. *Azhar* (2016), the Bollywood biopic on the former captain, does the opposite. It supports the players' cause – well, essentially that of Azhar Mohammad (Emraan Hashmi). Remember that the real Azharuddin was acquitted.

In the movie, senior players resent the ascent of the younger Azhar as the new captain. Later, he gets into a spat with another player, and drops him from the team. The enemy vows revenge; in real life, he became the whistle blower who exposed Azharuddin. In the film, Azhar says that he took Rs 10 million from a bookie to keep away the sleaze from team members. The fact remains that despite the payment the skipper plays a match-winning innings, and returns the money to the bookie.

Other movies include match fixing as twists and sub-plots. In *Lagaan*, Lakha (Yashpal Sharma), a team member in Bhuvan XI, is bribed by Company XI, to underperform. He rues his decision, having put the future of his village at stake, and puts in more than 100% effort. *Iqbal* (2005) is a story of a dumb-and-deaf villager, who plays for India. It is based loosely on the life of an actual player, medium-pacer Irfan Pathan.

Coached by a former cricketer, and a drunkard, Iqbal (Shreyas Talpade) plays for a lowly-placed Ranji Trophy team. His bowling helps the state to reach the finals. The fast bowler is now pitched against batsman Kamal (Adarsh Balakrishna), whose coach, Guruji (Girish Karnad), is established and powerful. If Kamal scores a century, he will find a place in the national side; if Iqbal does well, he is in with a chance, especially since the legendary Kapil Dev is a witness as a spectator-selector.

Guruji bribes Iqbal to underperform, and let Kamal become a centurion, with the promise that he will get into the national team the next year. Iqbal accepts it to save his family's property. But he manages a hefty cheque from a sports agent, bowls his heart out, and sends Kamal back to the pavilion with his coach's secret strategy, *chakravyuh*.

CHAPTER 10

EMIs KI PAGALPANTI

The credit culture, the mindset to 'buy now, pay later', and 'spend someone else's money' liberates and strangulates us. We become risk takers as we take our chances, and bet our lives on the stock roulette.

Movies: *EMI* (2008); *Desi Boyz* (2011); *Saare Jahaan Se Mehnga* (2013); *Home Delivery* (2005); *Pagalpanti* (2019)

RYAN (Arjun Rampal) typifies urban spenders like us in the movie, *EMI* (2008). He loves a luxurious lifestyle, is seen with beautiful women, and is never short of credit cards to finance his over-the-top consumption. There was a time, not long ago, when I did the same, and ran bills worth more than Rs 100,000 a month on my plastic. Ryan and I live in a world of credit, where payments are postponed to live a better today.

PLUs are comfortable with EMIs. Like Anil (Ashish Chaudhary) and Shilpa (Neha Uberoi) in the movie, we take loans to let the world know that we have gate-crashed into the reforms party. We tend to show off that we are more prosperous that we are. Our only salvation: the banks allow us to repay the money in EMIs stretched over months and years.

If you are an aspiration-driven parent, you will identify with another character in *EMI*, Chandrakant Desai (Kulbhushan Kharbanda), a father who will do anything to send his son to London for higher studies. He takes a loan, and puts his life on hold – he thinks and hopes that he will repay it when the son lands a well-paying job. The optimistic future can offset present troubles.

Want to buy a house? Realtors and banks give you money at 'cheap' interest, which you can repay over 15-20 years. Almost 90% of the price is financed. The paperwork is almost instant. No hassles, no waiting, no sweat! You need to only borrow the paltry 10% of the amount from family and friends. Voila! You are the owner of a villa in Gurgaon, Delhi's satellite city.

Everything from marriage and honeymoon, higher education, and car depends on loans and EMIs. Even domestic appliances, mobiles, and other items, can be purchased on e-commerce sites on EMIs, and at zero per cent interest. Every month, we are obsessed with the payments we need to make to the banks, and whether we have enough balance.

Nothing is wrong with the credit culture, we contend, and it is fine to spend money that we don't have today but will earn in the near future. This is the accepted norm in the modern world. For example, companies are valued on the basis of discounted future cash flows, i.e. present value of profits over the next 10 years. Stocks are priced on the expected quarterly results of the companies over the next few quarters.

Several studies indicated that Indians were better creditors than their western counterparts. A recent one by TransUnion CIBIL, a leading credit information agency, showed that 92% of the Indian respondents paid more than the minimum balance on their revolving credit. The figure was a tad higher than those in the US (89%) and Hong Kong (88%), and way above South Africa (44%) and Colombia (52%).

What this means is that there are lesser amounts of unpaid credit that attracts interest, and there are lower chances that the debts can spin out of control. Indians do not like to live with credit for too long, and wish to pay off loans soon. The report concluded that Indians were "conservative and credit-aware". They can live with the buy now, pay later syndrome.

Based on such trends and truths, the credit industry is excited. A recent annual report of SBI Card, which has more than 10 million card-holders, pinpointed a few reasons. The first is demographics. The median age of the population is less than 30 years, and a vast majority is in the younger age groups, and can be dubbed as millennial. Over a third of the SBI loans originate from this ever-confident, ever-growing section.

Over the past few decades, reforms led to higher prosperity and rising affluence, as per capita GDP zipped from Rs 90,000 to Rs 152,000. The feature of the credit culture is the new-to-credit customers, or the first-timers. Their numbers, stated the SBI report, showed a CAGR of 20% over the past three years, and a fourth of the new card additions came from them.

At a macro basis, there is a churn in favor of spending, rather than savings which, as a percentage of disposable incomes, dipped from 24% to 17% in six years. At a micro basis, credit card penetration is dismally low. The average number of cards per 100 persons is 3.5 in India, which is lower than China and the US. Credit card spends, at 3.2% of the GDP, are below those of the US (18%) and Hong Kong (26%).

However, easy money leads to easier consumption and difficult debt situations. Leverage pushes us into a debt quicksand. My friends went through these squeezes. They used a second card to pay the balance on the first, and then a third one for the second. They nervously and fretfully waited in vain for the bonanzas – bonuses or salary hikes – to get out of the clutches of credit.

Most of us forget that at the end of this tunnel, there is no light but a *bhai* – the debt collector. He relentlessly pursues you to repay the money. He uses every means, including abuse and violence, to achieve his objective. He is unlike Sattar Bhai (Sanjay Dutt), the owner of Good Luck Recovery Agency, in the movie, *EMI*. Despite his motto, *Loan liya hai toh har haal mein chukana padega* (If you have taken the loan, you have to pay it back at any cost), he doesn't asphyxiate you to financial death.

Sattar Bhai is better than a real-life collector. A review in the *Economic Times* said, "He acts as a marriage counselor to Anil and Shilpa, who are on the verge of separation. He plays agony uncle to Chandrakant, whose son steers away from responsibility. He works as a placement agency for Ryan offering him new job opportunities." Fortunately, these borrowers are able to change their ways, and repay their debts, thanks to their recovery agent.

Such positives do not always exist in the real world. The markets, which we revere in, are cruel. They cause disruptions and cyclical changes, which are not in our control. Economies tank because of factors that we don't understand. The Asian crisis in the late 1990s was due to the exchange rates. The 2008 global one was due to convoluted mortgages.

This is why Sattar Bhai maintains, "*Duniya mein har cheez badalti hai – mausam, rishtey, naseeb* (Everything changes in the world – weather, relationships, and destiny)." This is true about jobs and earnings. Economic fluctuations, which are caused by events that happen thousands of miles away, like the 'Butterfly Effect', can uproot you. They force you into situations that destroy you, like misguided missiles.

Desi Boyz (Local boys; 2011) is a movie about two friends, Nick (John Abraham) and Jerry (Akshay Kumar). Unlike Tom and Jerry – we laugh at their endless battles – they are in a symbiotic-parasitic relationship. Nick lives in his London pad, and works as an investment banker. Jerry is happy to live off his buddy. The 2008 financial crisis shatters their world. Nick is pink-slipped; Jerry has to find a job to remain his nephew's guardian.

Both resort to extreme measures, and become gigolos. They have to make ends meet, and nothing is out of bounds. Several people resorted to unimaginable decisions during the COVID crisis. A small-time trader, who had to shut shop, pitched a tent in Delhi's Daryaganj, and sold fake sex-enhancing pills. The change worked in this case as his income unexpectedly went up. Many took whatever work was available.

Every crisis makes us poorer, in relative terms, and in varying ways. Some lose jobs, and others see cuts in salaries. This is when we lament about debts, as we are unable to repay them. Our beliefs in higher future incomes die. We are in a mess. This is the time when the recovery agents arrive. We have to either let go of our cars and houses, which we bought with fanfare, or resort to new loans with higher interest.

Minor twists in our stories can happen in normal times too. For example, when we take a loan, we forget that the interest rate is not sacrosanct. It can change with higher inflation. Lenders push up rates to keep them above inflation to protect their revenues. Suddenly, we get a notice from the bank that we need to pay higher EMIs.

Remember the numerous discussions we have had about whether we need to opt for fixed or flexible interest. Either way, we are fixed. A flat one takes away the flexibility to avail of a lower one if the economy prospers, and interest rate drops. The flexible one scares us because we know that it will go up in times of high inflation. In fact, our fixation with inflation rules many of our financial and investment decisions.

In *Saare Jahaan Se Mehnga* (Costly than the world; 2013), a Bollywood satire, inflation is the protagonist. It revolves around a family's resolve to protect itself against future price rise. Puttan Pal (Sanjay Mishra) uses the strategy to buy now, and don't pay higher amounts later. He stacks three-year rations so that he is not affected by future price fluctuations.

Inflation and interest keep us busy. We have to earn enough to beat inflation. We check our balances to ensure that we have enough to pay EMIs

Most of us will admit that this is smart. When onion prices shot up, we bought them in bulk. The same was the case during the COVID crisis because of the expectations of higher prices and shortages. We are encouraged to buy a house, gold or car if we feel that the prices are likely to move upwards. Our instinct is to buy at the lows.

However, at another level, Puttan's decision seems absurd. Most of the food items are perishables, and other products come with expiry dates. So, we cannot stock everything, and not for longer periods. At the same time, we lock our money, when we buy in bulk, and forego the chance to earn extra if we invest or save it.

Like it or not, inflation consumes our lives. We buy mutual funds and stocks, rather than put the money in fixed deposits, because the returns from the former are likely to be higher. Gold is an ever-green choice because it has defied inflation. Real estate is safe to an extent because the demand, and price, is likely to go up in the future. We are caught in a perpetual revolving door.

The continuous cycle of economic slumps, and job losses and salary cuts, coupled with inflationary trends, ruin our tryst with credit. During the bad times, our optimism turns into pessimism. The loans haunt us. As we move from cash to digital payments, the problems loom over us.

According to the SBI Card annual report quoted earlier, Digital payments went up from Rs 590 crore in FY 16 to Rs 1,800 crore in FY 20. Technology is the key driver for the digital wave. It is both easier to pay and simpler to buy online and through mobile. Virtual money is the biggest instant gratifier for the millennial generation.

Ownership of smart phones and Internet penetration is high, and 5G will release seismic shockwaves. The growth in financial inclusion ensures that millions have bank accounts, and are comfortable with money transfers. India Two, which serves India One, accepts online payment for its services, and pays through digital apps for its purchases.

E-commerce is a part of our lives. The industry doubled over the past few years, and is likely to further treble over the next few. During the several COVID lockdowns, we purchased almost everything through our mobiles. Since e-commerce is more cost-effective than brick-and-mortar businesses, the former offers huge discounts to buyers.

Home Delivery (2005) is a movie that takes this trend to a hilarious level. At 28, Sunny (Vivek Oberoi) is at the height of journalistic-writer achievements. His editor at *Times of Hindustan* thinks that the paper sells because of his agony-uncle column, *Gyan Guru*. A Bollywood director offers him a screenplay contract. He has a fiancé and the opportunity to date an actress he is in love with. He believes in his talent and hard work.

One day, when Sunny is in the midst of his hectic life, he orders a pizza. This sets in motion a chain of events. He loses the job, wrestles with the film director as the script remains unfinished, and is prone to a deathly attack by a mad serial killer, P3P (Page 3 Psycho). He confronts the 51-year-old pizza delivery man from Mummy's Pizza, Michael, who helps the households he visits, and delivers life-slices to the protagonist.

Debt is not Sunny's problem, although he is hooked to the mobile and technology. But one wonders if he can become a creature of credit. A person with a flourishing career is likely to slip under the weight of loans. Living on credit, and being dependent on debt, is a lure.

The same is true for companies, who regularly fall into debt traps. In recent times, bad loans of state-owned banks rocketed by more than three times to almost Rs 9 trillion – don't count the zeroes – and dropped to below Rs 6 trillion. HR Khan, former deputy governor of RBI, predicted that they will definitely double, and can even rise by two-and-a-half times. He maintained that "18-20% of NPL (non performing loans) – from 7.5% earlier – is not ruled out for public sector banks".

Contrary to an erroneous belief, bad loans are not entirely due to reforms.

They existed even before 1991, as companies used political proximity to manipulate the banks. However, the sizes of the loans are higher, and the scams are more sophisticated.

At the same time, there can be little doubt that liberalization added to the pile of bad loans. More money was pumped indiscriminately into existing and sunrise sectors due to more opportunities and freedom. Banks, at least in the initial decades, were keener to lend to not-so-robust players. Politicians retained discretionary influence over state-owned banks.

Movies do not deal with these issues, although they refer to bad loans. A character in *Pagalpanti* (Madness; 2019) is Niraj Modi, who is based on the real Nirav Modi, who swindled the financial sector of billions of rupees. Nirav, like several others, ran away from the country.

Niraj (not Nirav) gloats in the film. "Let me tell you a story. When I was still in my mother's womb, she accidentally swallowed a penny. I was born with the penny clinched in my fist. The doctors and nurses tried very hard but they couldn't unclench my fist. Then my father showed me a dollar coin. I let go of the penny and took the dollar. Understand? I have a born connection with money! Yes. I only unclench my fist when I see more money," he explains.

Another character says that Niraj borrowed 320 billion dollars from his bank, of which he sanctioned only six billion dollars. A huge chunk was given without any guarantees by his predecessors. But as Niraj fled the country while he was employed with the bank, he is in trouble.

It is such bank employees who lose their jobs, and are jailed. A few commit suicides. The main perpetrator, who stole the money, finds a safe global haven. "And do you know who he is? He is a thief. A dacoit! A traitor and a turncoat! He stole the hard-earned money of millions of Indians," says a character. "The money doesn't belong to him."

One can contend that individuals live on credit, i.e. the money they don't have, and companies on debt, i.e. someone else's money. It is ironical that it is the same with wealth. Earlier, we discussed how the net worth of dollar-billionaires was based on paper valuations – the value of the stocks they owned. Their wealth swings like a pendulum, as the stock markets heave up and down in ephemeral and fleeting manner.

These vagaries of the stock market affect PLUs too. In the past few decades, more of middle class savings is invested in mutual funds and stocks. The number of mutual fund accounts is almost 100 million. Even if we discount for multiple accounts, we have to account for dependents of the account holders. For instance, a husband may have many accounts, but also has a wife and two children as dependents.

Stock-owners comprise half to 75% of the above figure. But this implies that our wealth is prone to momentary jerks. Hence, the undulations of the stock market cause us grief, and give happiness. Years ago, the owner of the TGIF franchise told me that his sales gyrated as per the Sensex, BSE index. People drank and ate more when their paper riches rose and fell.

The BSE Sensex! It reminds us of the sins and lusts of the body. It exudes sexuality of the materialistic kind, and is associated with speculation, greed, acquisition, and gambling. It is wealth creation of a kind that some experts dub as unproductive and wasteful. However, a website stated that Sensex was coined by a market analyst, Deepak Mohoni, and is a "portmanteau" of two other words, Sensitive and Index.

Calculations show that the Sensex climbed ceaselessly from 1500 points in July 1991, when Manmohan Singh presented his first Budget, to over 50,000 points in 2021, or more than 33 times. No one can deny that this is wealth creation of gigantic proportions.

Another way to look at stocks is through market capitalization, i.e. the collective price of every share owned by investors. Between March 1991 and January 2021, this figure escalated by 186 times. The assets under mutual funds were up 65 times between 1993 and 2020. These show that financial prosperity has seeped into middle class families, as their money multiplied.

However, the mystique of such statistics lies in their start and end points. You cannot own stocks forever; you have to buy and sell to make money. If we shift the beginning from July 1991 to April 1992, and keep the end point at 2021, the Sensex rose by 12.5 times, and not 33 times. The lower multiple isn't fascinating enough. At an annual return of 10% a year, money doubles in seven years, and goes up 16 times in 28 years.

If we retain the start point, and change the end point to March 2020, and not 2021, the increase is 20 times, which is slightly better than an annualized return of 10%. In 1998 and 2003, the Sensex went below 3,000 points or 1,000 points less than its level in April 1992. From April 2003 to December 2007, it accelerated from 3,000 to 20,000 points, and then went below 10,000.

CHAPTER 11

THE BAAZAAR AFTER SCAM 92

Reforms abet stock scandals. Big bulls like Harshad Mehta and Ketan Parekh become heroes, and nosedive in disgrace. The regulators doze off, and the policy makers do everything to prop up the market.

Movies: *Baazaar* (2018); *Gafla* (2006); *Scam 92* (2020) logic, reforms encouraged the madness of the crowd and herd mentality, which continued to quake the stock market. Like in the past, the narratives were similar. A fairytale was constructed to mesmerize the believers, who were told the false tale of why stock prices would rise forever. Then, a villain was found; he was post-facto projected publicly, only to hide the misdeeds and crimes of those who had to be protected.

Policy makers and regulators, who needed to stop such lunacies, were either participants in this whirl of passionate profit-making, or lethargic. An unending money pipeline was essential to feed the scams, and haunting rise of the indices. The scoundrels had to have access to the spigot to rig prices, and fool the mass investors, who were left holding the worthless papers.

Baazaar (2018) is a movie that aims to encapsulate the drama of the stock scams. Shakun Kothari (Saif Ali Khan) is the 'Big Bull', a hero to the investors who revere any person, who can single-handedly pull up stock prices. His blind followers include Rizwan (Rohan Mehra), who will do anything to get a chance to work for his idol. Nothing is off-limits for Shakun – bribes, insider trading, corruption, and skirting the laws.

Rizwan gets into Shakun's good books. The disciple joins the guru, gets in the inside ring, and spends time in the latter's lavish house and yacht. There's Rizwan's co-worker and lover, Priya (Radhika Apte), who lurks behind, and is the strength behind his soaring success. Shakun has a single advice for Rizwan: the latter cannot lose his money.

And then comes the defining moment. A company, Skycon, is likely to win the bid for a huge government telecom project. Shakun has advance knowledge as he bribes a minister to get the information. It is time for the Shakun-Rizwan duo to make the biggest killing on the exchange. Sadly, the wide-eyed devotee is set up. Skycon loses the contract. Shakun sells his stake before the bid announcement, Priya is on Big Bull's side in the con, and Rizwan is interrogated by SEBI.

Indian stock markets saw their share of characters like Shakun, who injected high-speed octane into stocks that dizzied upwards, and then crashed when the perpetrators ran out of the financial fuel. This chapter fleshes out four scandals since 1991, the first of which began its run when reforms were introduced. The second happened within a decade, and was influenced by global events. The third and fourth, over the next two decades, were global in nature but had local roots.

Each one proved two crucial issues. One, the market policies can aid and abet scams. The four waves of speculations were directly due to liberalization, which opened up new doors and windows for the scamsters to illegally make money, and dupe the retail investors. Rules meant to make the system more transparent and open, led to an opaque environment, which benefitted the dishonest. The cons flowed from the reforms, and the regulators kept quiet.

Once Adam Smith's invisible hand took control of the stock market, the policy makers believed, wrongly, that the high prices reflected the faith that investors had in their decisions. The Sensex, in effect, became the symbol to prove that the government's policies were on the right track. No finance minister in his right mind wanted the index to dip. Each one wanted it to go higher and higher, higher than its previous peak.

Cut to 1992, when Harshad Mehta, a rogue broker, became a living icon for the investors. He was smart and flamboyant. He was known for gun-slinging moves. He was the modern Midas; every stock he touched flew out of a spiral to reach unheard-of price levels. His riches were evident from his Lexus car, 15,000 sq ft home at Mumbai's plush Worli Sea Face, and the fact that he conjured up millions of rupees to buy stocks within hours and days.

For his followers, Harshad manufactured a myth, a fable that was both believable (if you felt he was a financial Pied Piper) and scoff-worthy (if he was a fraudster). The tale stemmed from the new Industrial Policy of 1991, which removed the shackles on businesses. Harshad came up with the 'replacement' hypothesis, or the 'Greenfield versus Brownfield' theory. It implied that existing firms had huge locked-in values.

Post-reforms, India allowed the existing players to expand furiously, and newcomers to set up plants. Harshad said that the investments needs of the latter were several times more than the former. Hence, the older, but efficient, plants, which could be expanded at incremental costs, compared to new factories, had to be valued afresh. The replacement costs of the older factories by new ones were quite high. Hence, the stocks of existing firms had to be re-valued, as they were worth multiple times their current levels.

By this logic, the value of a company like ACC, which had several cement plants, was inherently higher, if one considered the replacement costs of these factories, i.e. the money required to set up new ones of the same capacities. Investors lapped up these arguments, and queued up to buy ACC. Within a year or so, the stock catapulted from Rs 300 to Rs 10,000, a huge jump of more than 33 times. The same happened to many other shares, many of which, like ACC, were Harshad's favorites.

Mazda Enterprises flew from a mere Rs 40 to Rs 1,400 between October 1991 and March 1992. The BSE's market cap scaled up more than four times – from Rs 600 billion in 1990 to Rs 2.5 trillion in April 1992. Investors were euphoric. People who had never bought stocks were caught up in the tornado. Everyone wanted to buy shares – and hold on to them.

Newspapers went overboard. Magazines put Harshad on their covers. He was the god of investors, who would lead them to the prosperous and wealthy heaven. A magazine quoted a broker, who said, "To us in the trading ring, he is Amitabh Bachchan (the topmost superstar)." The story waxed eloquence about the Big Bull, "The biggest and the best at the game. And like the matinee idol, with a fancy house, fancy cars, and even hordes of autograph hunters."

Reports hinted that Harshad was friends with industrialists and CEOs. He could talk to them, lunch with them, and walk into their offices. Journalists were willing to give their pens to get juicy information crumbs about the Big Bull. He sported an attitude that "suggested a braggadocio". One of his oft-quoted gems was, "I don't create waves. I ride them." He surfed one of the biggest booms, as the Sensex quadrupled to over 4,000 in a span of a year.

Any assessment of his personal wealth was mired in mystery. The article quoted above revealed that Harshad could write cheques for Rs 5 billion to the State Bank to return his dues, and Rs 2 billion to the BSE to cover his purchases. In March 1992, a few weeks before the scandal broke, he paid Rs 260 million as advance income tax. He picked up Rs 10 million worth of ACC shares as his birthday gift. He claimed that he could bring $3 billion into the country, if the rupee was devalued.

Only stupid naysayers questioned his source of funds. Harshad seemed to be a buyer; he never sold to cash out and earn profits. It is after he was unable to repay the Rs 5 billion dues in time to the State Bank, and a whistle blower visited the Mumbai office of the *Times of India* to spill the beans, that we knew his secrets. The archaic system of how banks settled their accounts, which hadn't changed, helped him to access the money.

Since the banks kept a percentage of their deposits liquid, i.e. in cash or government securities, they bought the official paper regularly. In an age where interest rates generally went up, the new securities were issued at higher rates. Hence, they were more attractive than the older ones, not just due to the interest but because their prices were higher. Banks scurried to sell the old securities, and purchase the new ones.

Deals like these were recorded manually in ledgers, with a lag of a week or two. The ledgers recorded the amounts, and not the details. Since the daily turnover in securities was a massive Rs 1-2 trillion, there was too much unaccounted money floating around. The unrecorded amounts bloated as banks issued informal receipts, rather than securities, for the transactions. These receipts were exchanged among banks, and treated as cash.

Brokers, who got cash from the banks to deal in securities, apart from the unofficial receipts, used them for personal purchases until the ledgers were balanced. They had other sources as banks paid advances for deals. Thus, the brokers had an unending supply of funds, whose quantum grew larger as the daily securities business bulged. Harshad funnelled this money into stocks, and used his enlarged portfolio to borrow more from the banks.

Money also flowed in from non-banking sources. They too had cash that sought higher returns. Harshad and others used it buy more stocks, and stoke the stock market. Public sector bonds, apart from government securities, were another source of funds. There was too much cash swooshing around, and all of it was legal. The only illegality was that brokers weren't allowed to receive cash from the banks, and use them to trade on their accounts to buy and sell stocks.

Brokers, who got cash from banks to deal in government securities, used it to buy stocks. The money was with them till ledgers were balanced manually

Ketan Parekh, who was disparagingly called a mini-Harshad, used similar sources to rig prices at the turn of the century. Unlike the latter, who was the king of brick-and-mortar companies, the former specialized in technology shares, which became the darlings of global investors. In 1999, in the US, the start-ups in Silicon Valley were on fire, and their valuations multiplied despite their losses.

While the mystical twists and turns in the US were driven by the Internet stocks, the digital era was in its infancy in India. Ketan honed in on sectors that he termed as tech – software, media, and telecom. Reforms transformed these areas. The government auctioned mobile licences, new laws were framed for private broadcasters and cable distributors, and software engineers went to the US on H-1B visas to deal with the computers' millennium bug.

K-10 stocks, which included those from the three tech sectors, became the fad among investors. Like Harshad, the new messiah was wooed by businesses. CEOs invited him for presentations to convince him to buy their stocks. If there was whiff that Ketan had bought, or was contemplating to buy, a stock, its price shot up. The broker sued Bank of India for defamation because the latter filed a CBI complaint against him.

This was the time when foreign investors were sold on the India story. East Asian tigers were left licking their wounds after the 1997 currency crisis, Latin America had to deal with debts, and Japan lurched backwards. Among the emerging markets, India was on the radar. Global buyers had a huge appetite for Indian paper despite India's second nuclear test in 1998.

Indian markets were crazed, and the K-10 stocks went wild. The BJP was in power at the Center for the first time, and it was its endeavor to prove that its regime was a better reformer than the previous ones. Stock market was a jewel in its crown. The government did nothing to correct the foolhardiness, as long as stocks went northwards. The bulls raged ahead, as bears cowered.

Harshad and Ketan fixed the market. Through manipulations and insider trading, they moved up the indices. The scams were of huge proportions, which affected a large section of investors. After them, the Dubai-based Arun Panchariya created a small ecosystem within the stock market. His operations were quite different in nature and scope.

Panchariya knew that the sum of numbers can be larger than the whole. In his scheme of things, 1+1 equalled 11, and not 2. He focused on GDRs (global depository receipts), or paper floated by firms to list on the European exchanges. The GDRs are converted into shares at pre-fixed prices.

His universe possibly included 60 firms, which launched 70 GDR issues between 2002 and 2014. He involved foreign investors (both real and fronts), smaller global banks, and scores of Indian brokerages. All of them were owned or controlled by him, or through family and friends. They dealt and traded with each other to scale up the scandal.

Let us look at the modus operandi. K Sera Sera launches a GDR issue. Just before the issue, a Dubai-based entity, Vintage FTZ, which is owned by a firm based in British Virgin Islands, signs a loan agreement with a bank, Euram. The loan amount is the same as the size of K Sera Sera's GDR issue. Vintage buys all the GDRs, and credits a Euram's account that is opened by K Sera Sera to receive the GDR proceeds.

It is a closed loop. The money moves from Euram to Vintage and back to Euram, i.e. into K Sera Sera's account with the bank. The GDRs move from K Sera Sera to Vintage, with help from Euram's loan. K Sera Sera knows about the Vintage-Euram loan deal, and pledges the rights and titles of its account to Euram. The money in K Sera Sera account acts as collateral for the bank until

Vintage repays the loan.

There are cases when the GDR issue is subscribed by 2-8 foreign firms, which include Vintage. But the others are fronts based in Singapore, Hong Kong, and the UK. They don't make the payments to buy the GDRs, which are never deposited in their names. It is Vintage, which pays for the GDRs, and owns them. The addresses of these fictitious companies are untraceable. Emails bounce back, and letters come back undelivered. Regulators in these countries cannot locate these investors.

Vintage and Pan Asia Advisors, which is Euram's joint venture partner in Dubai, are owned by Panchariya. He is connected to the buyer of GDRs, and the money lender. He sometimes owns the issuers. For example, assume that the size of K Sera Sera's GDR issue is more than its equity base. The GDRS are converted into shares that are 2-3 times its existing share capital. Hence, after conversion, Panchariya's Vintage, along with the fictitious firms, becomes the majority shareholder in K Sera Sera.

Now, it is time for Act 2. K Sera Sera proudly claims that its GDR issue is subscribed in a single day. This, stated a report by SEBI, gives a "respectable appearance" to the company in the eyes of the Indian investors. This influences the stock price. This is especially so if the number of shares available in the market are low. Low volumes can bump up the stock prices.

GDRs, which are bought by Vintage, change hands. Foreign investors such as India Focus Cardinal Fund, Credo Investments Holdings, and KII purchase them. These are connected to Panchariya, who owns the first and lends money to it to buy the GDRs. He has financial links with the other two. These investors convert the GDRs into shares. SEBI concluded that the conversion was controlled by Panchariya.

In Act 3, most shares are sold to Indian brokerages such as Alka India, Basmati Securities, Oudh Finance, and SV Enterprises. Alka India is a listed firm, and 15 of its 16 promoters are Panchariya's relatives, including his brothers, Satish and Ashok. Alka India and Oudh Finance together own 37.7% in Basmati Securities, which owns almost 28% in Oudh Finance. The nominee of the demat account of SV Enterprises is Ashok, Panchariya's brother.

A series of synchronized deals and circular trading ensue between the foreigners and Indian brokerages. The first ensures that the buyers and sellers enter at the same time; the former place the orders and no one else except the select sellers buy the shares. The second guarantees that as they trade with each other, they rig the prices. An impression of high interest and high volumes is created among the investors.

Finally, the shares are offloaded on to the unsuspecting retail investors. They enter the market because of the GDR success, price rise, and volumes. As SEBI concluded, "It is the Indian (mass) investors, and not the foreign investors, who have ultimately paid for the GDRs."

SEBI thought that the sale to retail investors signalled the end of Panchariya's operations. But there is evidence that this isn't so. The regulator's investigations revealed that the story went deeper. As I mention earlier, the subscription to the GDR issues gives Panchariya a majority control in some of the companies. This raises corporate governance issues, as he can influence board decisions, related parties transactions, and financial deals.

What SEBI found was that when the issuer companies received the GDR proceeds, the foreign firms were sometimes the beneficiaries of the funds – 100% in some cases. Most of the latter are based in Dubai. They are trading companies, and deal in commodities. A few of them are also related to Panchariya and Euram. The regulator felt that the money transfers might be commissions for the successful GDR issues.

SEBI noted, "Subscription in GDRs escapes the radar of the regulators, since disclosure of GDR holders can be protected by taking defense of secrecy laws in foreign jurisdictions. Further, in jurisdictions with weaker Money Laundering regimes, companies may act as conduits to the persons who wish to launder their funds by allowing such persons to subscribe to the GDRs, who then sell these in the Indian market where liquidity exists, and the sale proceeds are repatriated through legitimate channels…."

The GDR-Panchariya scandal was a result of reforms, which allowed firms to tap capital markets abroad. Firms were allowed to price their issues, both domestic and foreign (like GDRs), on the basis of market demand. This gave flexibility to innovative charlatans like Panchariya to play new games, and dump the stocks on to the unsuspecting investors, and reap other benefits.

Technology became reforms' aide. Internet, digital, AI, data analytics, among others, became the buzz words for radical change – and immense hope. They were also the source of innumerable scandals.

Mumbai's NSE took a leap of imagination when, in 2010, it introduced COLO (Co-Location) for brokers to trade from inside its premises. The traders set up computers in the exchange's data center, which housed the machines that matched the millions of daily buys and sells. COLO became loco as the insider-brokers realized that the location gave them several advantages over their competitors.

COLO dealers, thanks to their proximity to NSE's data machines, received the buy-sell orders a few seconds earlier than those located outside the premises. This was heaven-sent as the COLO traders used bots and AI to place orders to profit from the demand-supply situation. They could react before the others, as they had prior information even it was a matter of nanoseconds. It was like the punters, who knew the odds and how they would change.

In 2015, a Singapore-based whistleblower, known as Ken Fong, alleged in an eight-page letter to the NSE that "certain vested brokers… get price information ahead of the others." In his book, journalist Palak Shah explained, "The idea of COLO itself had created an Orwellian state where brokers who were within the farm were higher among equals as the whistleblower's revelations now revealed that the entire infrastructure was in fact defective."

Rogue traders found other ways to manipulate the NSE. Each day the exchange created gigabytes of data on the trades. If cumulative data over the years was available to researchers, they could create predictive-analytical algorithms to figure out future stock patterns. The markets are random, but the algorithms could provide hints about the future.

One of the persons who accessed the NSE data revealed the aces in an email: "You have to swear everyone to silence about the fact that the data we are getting out of NSE is going into Algorithmic trading work. It would be a severe problem if this fact comes to light, since NSE has not even given the data to anyone else." Clearly, it hinted that the data use in algorithms gave some kind of advance information, which could be subtly used to push trades in a more profitable manner.

Early log-ins by the traders' computers in the COLO area were crucial. In most exchanges, the servers are switched on at the same time every day. This wasn't the practice at the NSE. Investigations showed that this was done manually at 7.30 AM on trading days. Of course, the "time wasn't fixed" and could differ by a few seconds and minutes. If people could switch on their computers before the others, they received the information about the day's trades earlier. It was a killer advantage.

Emails proved that brokers enquired about the "advantages of early log-in with COLO staff much before everyone else could come in". Some brokers received advice from the NSE staff. It was a matter of a few seconds, or even fractions of seconds. But this was enough for the bots and AI to take over, and execute the 'right' orders.

Log-in has another feature, which we don' realize easily. Each computer has a time clock. However, if it is not synchronized, the time on it may be different from the actual time. So, when the servers are switched on at 7.30 AM, the time on one computer can be 7.30.15, and 7.30.05 on another. What if you knew the clock setting of every computer within COLO?

You can, of course, get the market data first, which enables your bots to "hit the trades", and take positions ahead of the others. It was this kind of detailed and intricate planning – being in COLO, getting past data, adjusting the log-ins and clocks – that defined this scam. Palak Shah maintained that these advantages made big bulls like Harshad and Ketan "look like Lilliputians".

No one can doubt that the four stock shenanigans described in this chapter are complex. It is not easy to understand or explain them. One has to simplify them, which takes away their nuances. Hence, unlike Hollywood, Bollywood focused on the stock market in rare instances. Harshad was the protagonist in *Gafla* (Scam; 2006) and *Scam 92* (2020).

News18 stated that *Scam 92* did not pronounce a guilty verdict against the broker but presented "a morally dubious character and leaves it to our sensibilities whether to make him a messiah or a pariah". *Scroll.in* added, "*Scam 92* provides ample evidence of Mehta's dishonesty… only to float the idea that the system was the bigger villain."

However, a review in *First Post* presented the last word on the series. "In spite of all the research, the show never quite transports us into Harshad's mind – the greed, the compulsive need to be surrounded by materialist things, the arrogance of taking on the government, and the tragedy of a pioneer turned into an outcaste."

CHAPTER 12

WHAT IS MOBILE NUMBER?

As the mobile, Internet, and digital culture afflicts us, we become both freer and slaves to technology. Our lives are turned topsy-turvy as we grapple with virtual connectivity, as opposed to physical interactions.

Movies: *Haseena Maan Jayegi* (1999); *3G* (2013); *Ragini MMS* (2011); *Rajma Chawal* (2018); *Hacked* (2020); *Sabki Band Bajegi* (2015); *Mickey Virus* (2013); *Table No. 21* (2013); *Teen Patti* (2010); *Green Card Fever* (2003); *Hello* (2008); *Tashan* (2008); *Ek Chalis Ki Last Local* (2007) *Kalyug* (2005)

THE moment I mention the telecom, Internet or digital revolutions, most of us are likely to yawn. We are inundated with details of how these decisive technology trends shaped and reshaped our lives in the past few decades. There are thousands of articles, papers, and books, and we have spent thousands of hours conversing about them.

Hence, I will tell the story of these trends through movies. We are hacked; our *tashan* (style) is defined by them. Let me begin, not with a movie, but a popular song. In *Haseena Maan Jayegi* (The beautiful woman will agree; 1999), film stars Raveena Tandon and Govinda – as also Aruna Irani – twirl, shake, twist, and jerk to the music and lyrics of "What is mobile number?" Three lines from the song allure me. The first is when Govinda asks Raveena for her phone number, and adds, "What is your smile number?" The advent of the wireless in the 1990s, it seems, added to our happiness quotient – it made us beam and grin.

Global studies show that mobile has positive and negative impact on a person's wellbeing. This is especially true for young adolescents. We are hooked to phones – we reach out for them when we get up, and they are the last we see before we sleep. The texts, calls, posts on social media, and surfing bring smiles to our faces. Despite the negatives, we may be happier.

When Raveena joins in, her first two lines are:

"What is your style number?

Karoon kya dial number?"

Not many can deny that our mobiles have turned into style statements. Like we convey personal-social status through our car, house (address and location), social habitats, and clothes and accessories, the same is true about the mobile handset. We display our phones; this is evident from the way we carefully-carelessly slide them across the tables.

Later in the song, Raveena tells Govinda that she doesn't have a mobile but he can take her pager number. This essentially, for me, tells the narrative of how technology changes at a furious pace. In the 1990s, we started with those brick-like wireless handsets, which weighed a ton (it seemed like that) and sported an antennae. We couldn't fit them into pockets. Slowly, the mobiles became smaller, and then bigger as they became smarter.

During the 1990s, the mobile competed with pager. Many preferred the latter; the thinking was that the tiny pager was more useful in certain professions like the medical one. Within years, the pager vanished from the scene. Now, mobile rules, and we quickly replace the older models with new ones. Not many wish to be seen with the old handsets.

No wonder when Sam's (Neil Nitin Mukesh) mobile falls into the sea during his holiday with his wife, Sheena (Sonal Chauhan), in Fiji, he gets a second-hand 3G-enabled handset. This marks the beginning of horror-filled days for the couple in the movie, *3G* (2013). A review on *Zee News* said, "There are phantom video calls which repeatedly reiterate the last moments of some woman's death; there are weird occurrences in the villa." Sam and Sheena are "at the end of their tether".

It's not horror, but a social swamp that terrifies Lenny/Chanda in *Dev D*. For no fault of hers, her teenage lover uses the mobile to record a sexual clip between the two, and sends it to a few friends. The short MMS video becomes viral, and so does Lenny's face. Her life slides into an abyss, as she is dropped into an outcaste marsh. Today, MMS, like SMS, is passé, and people send such videos on Telegram and WhatsApp.

However, MMS was a rage when the movie, *Ragini MMS* (2011), was released. Ragini (Kainaz Motivala) and her boyfriend, Uday (Raj Kumar Yadav), are children of reforms, and yet different from each other. A review in the *Times of India* said that they "make an interesting couple. She's the fragile uptown girl, unabashed about expressing her sexual demands. While he's the *desi* boy who sprinkles his conversations with *gaalis* and cuss words, and is no-*nakhra* about his hormonal rage."

As they are "prototypes" of the urban people, you may bump into Ragini and Uday at college campuses and workplaces. They have different agendas during their sex escapade. Ragini loves Uday, and so is willing to sleep with him. Uday, who sells sex tapes of girls, "plans to film an explicit video… with the girl (Ragini)". Then the movie shifts to paranormal activities, which turns into a nightmare for the young duo.

One of the interesting aspects of *Ragini MMS* is the manner in which it is shot. According to a review in the *Economic Times*, "The entire runtime of the film happens to be video footage, either shot on handheld camcorder or through hidden cameras." Similar tools are used in another movie, *Love, Sex Aur Dhokha* (2010). It is shot in digital format with handy-cam, security camera, underwater camera, and spy camera, and includes sex videos on security camera and sting operations.

As the mobile revolution caught pace, Indians were addicted to the Internet – the slow and cumbersome dial-up connections first appeared in 1995. The combination between the two, i.e. Internet on mobile, led to an explosion in social media, and access to entertainment. The smart and sleeker handsets, and plummeting data prices, first in 2002 and then by the end of the second decade, accelerated the trends.

The funnier and more endearing moments of social media are captured in the movie, *Rajma Chawal* (Rice with kidney bean; 2018). As parents, we crib that children live in a make-believe world, where they have thousands of "friends" and "followers" on Instagram and Facebook, and are disconnected from families, buddies, and companions. Most of them are lonely.

Raj Mathur (Rishi Kapoor) is hurt that he loses the link with his son, Kabir (Anirudh Tanwar), after he moves from New Delhi to Old Delhi after the wife's untimely death. Kabir, who blames the father for mother's accident, resents that he has to live far from his friends and music (he is a guitarist). The only way the father and son can talk to each other is by shouting and fighting at the dinner table. Raj gets a smart phone, and opens a Facebook account.

Using a false identity of a girl – he uses a random photograph – Raj peers inside Kabir's heart. Henceforth, at the dinner table, both are on their phones. The two chat through profile photographs. The twist comes when the girl, whose identity Raj assumes, enters the plot. Tara/Seher (Amyra Dastur) is a "Meerut-born runaway with a torrid history, a nose-ring, a weird haircut, hipster tattoos, and a rich *Jat* boyfriend".

A review in the *Hindustan Times* said that the movie's "patronizing gaze of the country's youth is limited to promiscuity, bad haircuts, Sufi rock bands and, you guessed it, social media mechanisms. The stereotypes aren't entirely misguided… (but) there is a marked difference between depicting modernity from a traditional perspective and interpreting modernity as a legitimate socio-cultural truth".

Homo Sapien evolved into powerful and intelligent species because of communication. Gestures, sign-language, and verbal interaction helped humans to reach the top of the pyramid. Now, instead of living with nature, we change it in myriad and dangerous ways. But social media has limited face-to-face contact. We like to hide behind screens, sometimes in the garb of false identities, and continue to live our lives as if nothing has changed.

It's true that this expands our horizon. We connect with people we couldn't have a decade ago – school and college friends, long-lost relatives and neighbors, as also soul mates and professionals. We discover internal emotions that we didn't think existed in us. We are more aware of people. However, there is a downside. We may lose feelings to realistically judge, and figure out the intentions of the others.

Hacked (2020) isn't a movie about the perils of social media. It's about how we are unable to comprehend emotional relationships with people in the non-virtual and physical world. We may be more unaware – not that this wasn't true before Internet and mobile – of who our real friends are, and who are not. As we spend a large proportion of our time virtually, the distinction with the real are blurred. Is the real the make-believe?

"We bury all our *raaz* (secrets) on the Internet (and social media) today," says one of the characters in the movie. This is why it is easier for people to hack into our lives, and turn it topsy-turvy. This happens to Sam (Hina Khan), a resident of the high-rises, who "dons designer clothes, and heads the editorial team of a top fashion magazine… and has a Bollywood actor for a boyfriend. So, what could possibly go wrong?," said a review in the *Times of India*. "Turns out, everything."

Sam has a one-night-stand with an obsessed neighbor, Vivek (Rohan Shah), in a weak moment because her boyfriend, Om (Sid Kakkar), fails to materialize at her birthday party. Later, she tells Vivek that the incident was a mistake, and he should not interfere in her personal life. But Vivek has a crush on her, as he had on several women in the past. He decides to crush Sam – by hacking her phone and laptop.

Vivek gets Sam fired from the job. There is more turmoil as the latter's intimate photographs with Om appear on the Internet. Being a celebrity, Om denies the relationship, and Sam is shattered. Another neighbor, her childhood friend, emerges as a solace in these trying times. Rohan (Mohit Malhotra) helps her to file a police complaint, and beats up Vivek. When Sam murders Vivek, the flip side of hacking saves her. Before the act, she convinces Vivek to wipe out the evidence.

Obviously, there are the opposites of Viveks in the wireless world. Ethical hacker, Mickey (Manish Paul), or Kung-Fu Chameli, as he is known in cyberspace, helps the police to solve cyber crime in the movie, *Mickey Virus* (2013). The cops are clueless and, according to a review in the *Times of India*, "can't tell a 'hawker' from a 'hacker'". Mickey, in contrast, has a brain that's "faster than any high-speed Internet", although his "*zubaan* needs a 'backspace' all the time".

"We aren't Internet *keedas* here, but let's try cracking into Mickey's world of codes, crypts, and consoles. This one isn't so deadly that we can't decode, or so simple that we just download and ESC. So, risk it and ENTER," added the review. Doesn't this describe us? Our links with cyberspace are complex enough for the non-initiated to be flummoxed. Yet the cohorts can understand why we do what we do.

But let's not fool ourselves. For many, the Internet is the portal, the Aladdin's cave (*Khulja, Sim Sim*), to excitement and depravities within and outside us. We use it to visit porn sites. *Kalyug* (Age of downfall; 2005) is a movie that brings to light the sordid details. Indiapassion.com showcases secretly-taped sex videos of married couples. The protagonist and his wife are among them.

Although the website was fictional, it led to controversies. One version stated that the movie "inspired a real website of the same name". Another one maintained that the website existed before the release. It embarrassed the filmmaker, Mahesh Bhatt, who clarified that he wasn't aware of the website, and "there was no tie-up between us and the owners of the portal".

Bhatt added, "We make sure that any realistic story that we work on doesn't have real-life connection. We have a research team that does the checking but we don't know how they missed this portal's presence." However, as www.mid-day.com reported, "Such a site exists and is now conducting an extremely popular porn tour of India. In reality, the portal is taking its users on a scintillating journey, 'The Indian Road Trip.'"

"The show features two westerners travelling across four Indian metros – Delhi, Kolkata, Mumbai, and Bangalore – picking up local girls and having sex with them. The real-life sex videos are then posted on the portal. The clips can be viewed by paying Rs 150 and can be accessed only by registered numbers. Membership of the website starts at $1 per day to around $60 for 90 days. Interestingly, the first stop of the tour was Delhi, which the portal titled 'Delhi Dessert,'" said mid-day.com.

Internet-mobile users, whose numbers grew phenomenally, found other means to keep busy, aloof, and in dangerous company. Online games are both pleasurable and painful. *Teen Patti* (Three-card game; 2010) is a movie that mixes the universes of online and physical card games. The protagonist, Venkat (Amitabh Bachchan), is a genius professor, but teaches math to village students. The story starts with a letter he receives.

Perci Trachtenberg (Ben Kingsley), the "world's greatest living mathematician", asks Venkat to come to London to discuss the latter's equation, which is on probability and randomness. The Indian is thrilled, but remembers the grief the equation caused him in the past. Years ago, when he submits it to the institute where he teaches, it is rejected. This is despite the fact that he uses it successfully in the online *Teen Patti* game.

Later, the genius tries his theory with three students of a colleague – and it works. Venkat's premise is that if he can know the three cards (in *Teen Patti*) of one player, he can guess the ones with the rest, and play for a win or pack. His colleague coaxes him to try it among real players, and in Mumbai's dens. The experiment degenerates into greed, blackmail, and betrayal.

Teen Patti is "inspired" by the Hollywood flick, *21*. In the latter, a professor, whose character is based on a mathematician, ropes in students to learn card-counting at Blackjack. They make weekend trips to Las Vegas, and suck the casinos of hundreds of thousands of dollars. They use strategic seating positions, and hand signals and gestures to beat the casinos at their own game.

Online gaming went hand-in-hand with online-TV reality shows, as the media expansion went ballistic, initially despite reforms and later due to them. The TV programs enthralled a nation, especially after '*Kaun Banega Crorepati* (Who will become a multi-millionaire)', which was modelled on the American show, *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*.

In reality-shows, morality takes a back seat for the sake of high-end rewards. It shows to what lengths young people go for designer dreams

Khan (Paresh Rawal) invites a vacationing couple in Fiji to a reality show in *Table No. 21* (2013). All that the husband-wife duo has to do is to answer eight questions, and walk away with the prize money of Rs 210 million. But there lurks a big danger in this reel-show. As Khan keeps reiterating, lie and be ready to die, and once you are on the hot seat, there is no turning back. You have to play the game.

Table No. 21, said a review in *Filmfare*, borrowed liberally from Hollywood movies. In the beginning, the camera captures the live suicide of a man falling from a building. "*Untraceable* (2008) had similar scenes where a serial killer posts videos of his victims online. There are many panoramic shots of lovely Fijian locales in *Table No. 21*. All of which you can extensively spot in past films like *The Blue Lagoon* (1980), *Reel Paradise* (1992), *Couples Retreat* (2009), and many more."

But the Hindi movie's depiction goes beyond Hollywood inspirations, and shows the true nature of reality shows. "The narrative then weaves itself into a rather bewildering and bizarre labyrinth that is partly a tongue-in-cheek tribute to the preposterous aspirations of reality game-shows where ludicrous thresholds of morality are crossed for high-end rewards, and partly a comment on what lengths young people would go for their designer dreams," said a review in *India Today*.

The concept of reality entertainment reached a peak with *Sabki Band Bajegi* (Everyone will suffer; 2015), which is touted as "India's first reality film". It is the recreation of "actual conversation that the director apparently had with his celeb friends at a party". They discuss taboo topics such as virginity, open relationship, extra-marital affair, casting couch, and ONS. Some reviews said that the dialogues slipped down to stereotypes, which are usually wrong and over-the-top.

Stereotypes became the norm when it came to software specialists, i.e. those who went to the US in the 1990s, and call center employees of the 2000s. *Green Card Fever* (2003) cuts through the falsehoods associated with the travails and troubles of IT engineers' efforts to get the American green card, which allows people to stay permanently in the country, and gain citizenship. For those who get H-1B visas, this is the penultimate goal.

Hundreds of articles focused on the Indians' plight. One stated that those who came back to India to perform rituals for parents were denied visas. Those who held the same US jobs for years were forced to leave along with spouses and children. Employers, who sponsored the workers' visas, harassed and exploited the employees. The latter went without promotions.

Ugly as these truths are, they force the visa-holders into the grip of dishonest lawyers, middlemen, and touts. In India and the US, scores of websites and advertisements goad the troubled ones to approach these experts – many are genuine – to solve their issues related to visas and green cards. The authorities in both these countries have cracked down on illegal rackets that enable people to twist the system, and immigrate to the US.

Similarly, those, who became the outsourcers, and worked in call centers, lead tough lives. Based on Chetan Bhagat's novel, *A Night @ Call Center*, the movie, *Hello* (2008), aims to flesh out the nuances about issues such as the employees' double identities at work, emotional fracas in personal lives, and what the outsiders see as their constant fixation with wealth.

Hello is about six friends, who work in a Mumbai call center, assume Americanized names (like Pearl, Rebecca, Sam and Victor) because they deal with the US clients, speak with an accent (often with 't' spelt out), and are asked never to reveal their location (India). They joke about the "dumb" American, whose brain is "equal to that of a 10-year-old Indian". (In reality, the Americans too ridicule the Indian call center workers.)

Given the time difference, the six friends work at odd hours. *Hello* tells the story of one night when they are in the office until 4 AM. In *Ek Chalis Ki*

Last Local (The last local train at 1.40 AM; 2007), Nilesh (Abhay Deol), who too works in a call center in Mumbai, misses the last 1.40 AM local train at Kurla station. He is pushed out by a police officer, and is unable to find public transport because of bomb blasts. This is when he meets a beautiful damsel in distress, Madhu (Neha Dhupia).

At personal levels, the lives of the eight characters are in twirls. Nilesh is comfortable with night shifts, booze, and after-shift parties. As he walks with Madhu to the next auto-rickshaw stand, they stop over at a local pub for drinks. The six friends in *Hello* find themselves in emotional turmoil due to breakups, arranged marriages, unfulfilled love, and cheating husbands. Drunkenness and anger, and sudden mood changes seem to be an inherent part of their complex characters.

Nothing is complex about their avarice or materialism. They earn more than the professionals in manufacturing, but some are enveloped by greater greed. Nilesh is entangled with a police encounter specialist, two Dons, and a bag that has Rs 25 million. Jimmy (Saif Ali Khan), a call center worker in *Tashan* (Style; 2008), steals an aluminium trunk full of cash that belongs to a Bhojpuri Don. Some of the six friends nurture a longing to become richer – and happier.

Only God and destiny can help them. In *Hello*, the six friends end up in a car that is delicately balanced on a cliff. If anyone moves, the vehicle will topple over. God calls them on a broken mobile, asks them to be calm, and believe in themselves. The fire brigade arrives in time to save them.

Nilesh enters the Kurla station with Rs 70 in his pocket – these call center types believe in plastic. When he catches the first local at 4.10 AM, he is accompanied by a bag that has Rs 25 million. Three days later, he proposes to Madhu at the same station. As far as Jimmy is concerned, he is still on the run to recover the trunk for the Don.

CHAPTER 13

THE FALTU 3 IDIOTS

Liberalization unleashes forces that improve and destroy our education system. It forces people to focus on exams to succeed in the competitive corporate world. And it disconnects us from nature and environment.

Movies: *3 Idiots* (2009); *FALTU* (2011); *Hindi Medium* (2017); *Blackboard vs Whiteboard* (2019); *Why Cheat India* (2019); *Munna Bhai MBBS* (2003); *Waiting* (2015); *Aisa Yeh Jahaan* (2015); *Zor Laga Ke… Haiya* (2009)

I love the scene in *3 Idiots* (2009), when an engineering student, Rancho (Aamir Khan), describes a machine – "anything that reduces human effort", and "from pen's nib to pant's zip, everything is a machine". Then his colleague, Chatur (Om Vaidya), launches into a 20-second jargon-filled definition. Once Rancho is kicked out of the classroom – isn't it logical – he comes back, and gives a more complex definition of a book that the professor is unable to grasp.

In just over three minutes, the scene summarizes what is wrong with the country's education system, not merely in professional institutes but also in colleges and schools. We cram, reproduce what's in the books, and do not bother about concepts. (This is the difference between Rancho and Chatur.) Exams and marks define our education – not knowledge. There is pressure to get into a quality school or college, and get the requisite marks.

This explains why Rancho, aka Phunsukh Wangdu, who has a grasp over concepts, teaches village students in Ladakh. Chatur is a successful high-level manager in private sector, who earns well and lives a luxurious life. This is what happens in reality. The Ranchos of the world are rarely able to compete with the Chaturs. Obviously, *3 Idiots* twists the plot to show Rancho as a rich, successful and secret innovator, with hundreds of patents under his belt.

The aim of reforms is to create more people like Rancho and Wangdu. But they don't. In life, Rancho invariably loses out to Chatur. But most of us, who are average or just above-average students, want Rancho to come out on top. This is why *3 Idiots* connects with most students, especially those who face the pressure of studies, exams, marks, and jobs.

When we watch *3 Idiots*, we are thrilled that Rancho transits to the stature of Wangdu. But more than that we are fascinated by what happens to his friends, Farhan (R Madhavan) and Raju (Sharman Joshi). The latter, who consistently gets the lowest marks in the engineering college, finds a job. Farhan, who is an average student, pursues his passion to become a wildlife photographer.

Pitted against the three idiots is the director of the engineering college, Dr Viru Sahastrabuddhi (Boman Irani), or Virus, who believes that education needs to be rammed down the students' throats. His students have to accept and imbibe the doctrine of mugging up, and doing well in exams, whatever may be the efforts. The students have to study 15 hours a day, every day, and glide through weekly assignments.

It's a marathon – three years in graduation, or four or more years in a professional college, apart from the 12-14 years in school. It's a long-distance race, but one has to consistently sprint to reach the finish line. You can take a break for a few seconds, catch your breath, but at your own peril. There are always others, who want to overtake, and leave you behind.

I was lucky to become like Farhan. From a local school, I shifted to a recognized one in ninth class. My rank, which was either first or second, tanked. Somehow, I applied myself six months before the 12th board, and was among the top 20 in school. My marks ensured that I wriggled my way into one of the topmost engineering colleges in its third and final merit list.

Within three semesters, I was lost. I couldn't handle the pressure, and was deemed a failure by friends and professors. I quit. My family got to know after a year or so. I became a journalist; my father shunned me, and didn't understand what I did. Only a few friends stuck around, but most deserted me. Some of my college mates became hot-shot global professionals. In my case, there was no suicide, and no failure. I survived as a journalist.

FALTU (2011) looks at what happens to students, who are left in the lurch after they pass out of school with "below-average marks". Three friends – there is a magic about the number; it's possibly the smallest group – realize that they cannot get admission in any college. To convince their families that they are enrolled, and with help from Google Chand (Arshad Warsi) and others, they set up a fake college.

Unexpectedly, the campus attracts people who want to join the so-called alternate careers. "Pretty much like *3 Idiots*, *FALTU* also attempts to bring respect to its irreverent title, and propagate the message to follow your dreams, turn your hobby into profession, and do what you want to do rather than mugging up lessons in classrooms," said a review in the *Economic Times*.

The same review concluded that the "intentions" of the movie were "noble". It doesn't work in real life. Despite the realization that education's aim is to make one a better person, parents and students scamper through to get into the best schools and colleges. They are willing to do anything to make it to the top. This forms the theme of another Hindi movie, *Hindi Medium* (2017).

Someone said, "English is India. India is English." In India, English is not merely a language. It connotes class. "You may be chauffeur-driven in a fancy BMW, flash your Chanel bag, sport a pair of the latest Versace shades, and so on, but if you can't speak the Queen's language as she spoke, there go your chances to be invited to the really swish parties in town. And for your offspring to crack the most difficult exam ever: to get into the best private schools," said a review in *Indian Express*.

English is the medium, and message, added the same review. Mita (Saba Qamar) and her husband, Raj (Irfan Khan), are well-to-do Hindi-speaking couple, who want their daughter, Pia (Dishita Sehgal), to be admitted into Delhi's best English medium school. "They do everything they can – move out of their ancestral home into a plush neighborhood, abandon their *desi* swag for designer wear, and switch from *bhangra* to *angrezi* beats. Alas, it doesn't cut it," said a review in the *Times of India*.

Everything fails, including the "counselling" sessions to "crack" the school interviews. It is time for Plan B: "fake their poverty and get Pia admitted on the basis of '*gareeb* quota' (meant for economically-weaker sections, or EWS)", said a review in *Bollywood Hungama*.

The moral tale uncoils, said a review in *Asian Age*. It added, "At one level, the film is about the pursuit of school admission by an obsessed mother and pliant father. At another, it is the story of the Indian education system that's split into two discordant strands: In one universe are schools that are bending backwards to become the magic capsule from which kids will emerge as accomplished geniuses…. In a parallel universe are schools without desks, essential books, running water in bathrooms. In these schools study kids… who beat all the odds."

Commercialization is education's bane. If you have money, you can get into the best schools and colleges – sometimes even this is not enough, as *Hindi Medium* shows. *Blackboard vs Whiteboard* (2019) is based on "how in modern times education too… is now considered as a business opportunity. Not only cities but even small towns and villages are engulfed in the evil malpractices," said a review in the *Times of India*. Money talks and makes you learn.

Raghubir Yadav, who plays the protagonist in the movie, explained the problems in a media interview. "Education is the primary stepping stone of every person's life. Without proper education, it's extremely difficult to realize your goals. But while development is happening at a rapid pace, there is an extreme lack of quality education…. Apart from that… adults from poor families… do not want their children to attend schools…. Moreover, many teachers from these areas… feel that students are not interested, hence it becomes a vicious cycle of illiteracy."

Since there is a dearth of quality education, which is expensive, the situation is grave. Rakesh, aka Rocky (Emraan Hashmi), in *Why Cheat India* (2019) specializes in cheating, and fake certificates. He gives Rs 50,000 to bright students and professionals to appear in entrance exams on behalf of the weaker candidates. One of the persons in his gang is Sattu (Snigdhadeep Chatterjee), who takes coaching classes in Kota, and gets a rank of 287 in the engineering exam. He joins hands with Rocky in the money-making scam.

Rocky offers a fake degree to Sattu, and asks the latter to work in Qatar. When Sattu's sister wants an MBA degree to get a promotion, Rocky agrees. When he hands it in her office's parking lot, he is arrested. It is a sting operation concocted by the sister to extract revenge. The reason: Sattu commits suicide when his fake degree is discovered. After his prison term, a reformed Rocky starts an engineering college to help aspiring students.

According to a movie review, "The film gives us Rakesh or Rocky Singh… an education shark who preys upon the insecurities of students under pressure and makes exam centers his happy hunting ground. It is also here that he finds his young recruits that are the foundation of an impressive evil empire. Rakesh (Rocky), a medical entrance exam-reject-turned-entrepreneur thus avenges his failure by loading the dice against a faulty system." This is one of the reasons that India cheats.

> Jadu ki jhappi works better than tests and scans. In many cases, patients don't want surgery, and pain. They want love, support and empathy

Faking exams and cheating to get into a professional institute is the underlying subject of *Munna Bhai MBBS* (2003). But the movie goes beyond cracking the entrance (*Why Cheat India*), and problems with the education system (*3 Idiots*). It tells us what is wrong with the medical profession. Treating it like a business impacts doctors, who lack empathy for the patients. The ill are treated as mere numbers, beds, or entities, rather than human beings with emotions.

Sometimes, instead of a slew of tests and scans that the doctors order, which forces patients to pay through their noses, it is better to offer hope and compassion. With his '*Jadu ki jhappi* (Magic hug)', Munna Bhai (Sanjay Dutt), a fraud medical student and gangster, makes people happy. The patients reduce their dependence on medicines and therapy, begin to enjoy the present, and believe in the future.

One of the old patients is on a death wish, and refuses to eat. His interest is carrom, which he cannot play in the hospital. Munna arranges a board, and plays with friends, like Circuit (Arshad Warsi). The ailing man cannot stop himself. He joins the game, and pots the Queen. When the others urge him to celebrate, he is serious. Munna catches his dilemma; he has to cover the

Queen, and the former is in a difficult spot. It is an amazing shot, and the jubilant patient asks for a glass of juice.

No one thinks that there is a cure for the brain-dead Anand Banerji (Yatin Karyekar). Munna Bhai offers him sympathy and love. He doesn't expect the patient to get out of the wheelchair; he wants to make sure that Anand is treated like a human in the last few months. After Munna's shamed departure from the college, Anand gets up from the wheelchair.

In most cases, it's not about how we recover; it's how we die. In the book, *Being Mortal*, Atul Gawande wrote, "You don't have to spend much time with the elderly or those with terminal illness to see how often medicine fails the people it is supposed to help. The waning days of our lives are given to treatment that addle our brains and sap our bodies for a sliver's chance of benefit. They are spent in institutions – nursing homes and intensive care units – where regimented, anonymous routines cut us off from all the things that matter to us in life. Our reluctance to honestly examine the experience of aging and dying has increased the harm we inflict on people and denied them the basic comforts they most need. Lacking a coherent view of how people might live successfully all the way to their very end, we have allowed our fates to be controlled by the imperatives of medicine, technology, and strangers."

On the one hand, hospitals and doctors make us lonely, without intimacy. On the other, our family and friends, except for a few loved ones, desert us in our last days – most visit us a few times for social correctness, and only attend our funerals. Our lives become like that of Ivan Ilyich in Tolstoy's classic novella, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. We feel ill, lie still, and our state worsens as we feel degradation due to some "unnamed, untreatable disease".

"What tormented Ivan Ilyich most," Tolstoy wrote, "was the deception, the lie, which for some reasons they all accepted, that he was not dying but was simply ill, and he only need keep quiet and undergo a treatment and then something very good will result." This is the hope that the medical fraternity keeps alive in us. As we go through more tests and scans, and more surgeries, we slip into more inactivity.

The newly-married Tara (Kalki Koechlin), a character in *Waiting* (2015), is a "brash, foul-mouthed, social media savvy young girl who rushes to Kochi after she is informed of her husband, Rajat's (Arjun Mathur) car accident". As the husband lies in a wreck, Tara laments that despite her 1,500 FB friends, and 5,000 Twitter followers, she feels lonely.

Her friendship with Shiv (Naseeruddin Shah), whose wife is in a coma for eight months, grows. A review in *Filmfare* said he "religiously visits her (wife) every day, while reading medical journals at home, hoping to find a cure". The doctor advises an operation for Rajat. Tara is torn apart due to the risk of paralysis. Shiv dismisses the doctor as the "pawn of the hospital board and insurance companies who only care about making money and not the patient".

Their confrontation seems like a Tolstoy-Gawande debate. Shiv, the older man, wants Tara to give Rajat a chance, an opportunity to live by refusing the doctor's advice for an operation. Tara says she is a realist, and believes in medical science. The two can cope with their grief together, as they did earlier in the movie. But their final solution – to let the patient live comfortably versus instant treatment – is different.

How to survive is a theme that plays out not just in medical science but in other spheres. *Aisa Yeh Jahaan* (The world is like this; 2015), said a review in *News18*, is a "socio-environmental film that focuses on life and survival. Also, it's India's first carbon-neutral film…. Well, it means that all of the carbon dioxide emitted by the film-making process – lights, cameras, (and) transportation – was totalled up and offset by comparable investments in renewable energy". It is a story about how we are de-linked from nature.

Like many of us, an Assamese family comes to the city of dreams. The father, Rajib (Palash Sen), is "happy" with a 9-to-5 job with an MNC, and the mother, Ananya (Ira Dubey), is a receptionist who is boastful about her non-existent wealth. Their young daughter, Ruhi (Prisha Dabbas), spends time with an underage domestic help, who too is from Assam. The four are representatives of urban animals in city-specific concrete jungles that we have constructed.

On a vacation to Assam, the daughter is exposed to a world full of greenery, birds and animals, farms (paddy fields), water bodies, and so on. The grey and dull concreteness of a bustling city contrasts with the green and other bright colors in an open and seemingly-expansive town. In the former, the air is heavy and constricting – remember the deathly air in Delhi in winters. In the latter, there is oxygen that sets you free – in the lungs and heart.

Innocent as she is, Ruhi asks the most simple and relevant questions. The trees release oxygen in the atmosphere. Cities like Mumbai have no trees as they are mercilessly cut to build homes and offices. Hence, the urban residents will not be able to breathe due to lack of oxygen.

A tree, not trees, is the subliminal protagonist in *Zor Laga Ke… Haiya* (Give it a push; 2009). It is a children movie in which five "ecologically-aware kids" engage in 'Operation Save Tree' to protect the one in their compound. They battle with Raavan first, and then take on Satan, and his army. It is not surprising that the five get help from a street kid, Ram.

Raavan is a "sinister-looking homeless", a role played by Mithun Chakraborty. The kids are scared of him and, with Ram's help, build a tree-house to keep a watch on their adversary. The tables are turned when Raavan takes over the tree-house. Then there is another twist.

Mithun said in an interview, "With no place to stay, he (Raavan) seeks refuge in a tree-house built by these kids. They think that Raavan is a kidnapper and try to evacuate him from there." A review in the *Economic Times* added, "After some small squabbles, the kids and Raavan befriend each other with the tree-house serving as a common platform, bringing them close."

Now they have to save the tree. A builder, Bakshi (Gulshan Grover), and an associate, Gupta (Mahesh Manjrekar), wish to cut it, either legally or illegally, because they want to build an access road to their new tower. "The kids and Raavan wage a war against Bakshi making him unsuccessful in his attempts to ravage the tree," said the above review.

Most trees around us are not so fortunate. In Mumbai, the metro expansion envisaged the cutting of thousands of trees. The Tribal population in the area alerted the civil society, which warned that the destruction would hasten the ill-effects of Climate Change. Despite the protests, 2000 trees were cut during one night. Only with media's focus on the issue did the state government swing into action. It announced that the car shed for the metro line, which was to be built on forest-land, would be shifted elsewhere.

However, this took the controversy in another direction. The state government claimed that it owned the land on the new site. The Center disagreed. Months after the initial drama, some of the trees were saved, but there is no clarity on the alternate site.

Post Script: The banner headline in the *Times of India*'s Delhi edition of January 18, 1978, read: "30 Dead, 700 Hurt As Cyclone Hits North Delhi." The accompanying report dubbed the cause as "a freak funnel-shaped whirlwind, accompanied by rain". Only the next day did the newspapers explain the "very, very rare phenomenon" correctly, and called it a tornado. Amitav Ghosh, in his book, *The Great Derangement*, wrote, "This was… the first tornado to hit Delhi – and indeed the entire region – in recorded meteorological history."

He added, "Only much later did I realize that the tornado's eye had passed directly over me. It seemed to me that there was something eerily apt about that metaphor: what had happened in that moment was strangely like a species of visual contact, of beholding and being beheld. And in that instant of contact something was planted deep in my mind, something irreducibly mysterious, something quite apart from the danger that I had been in, and the destruction that I had witnessed, something that was not a property of the thing itself but of the manner in which it had intersected with my life."

CHAPTER 14

AB TAK DO HAZAAR

It is odd that corruption grows with higher economic growth, and ease of doing business enhances the ease of earning illegal profits. Fissures in mafia gangs and rise in regional political parties move rent collection from the Center to states, and from the districts to state capitals.

Movies: *Company* (2002); *Satya* (1998); *Ab Tak Chappan* (2004); *Mumbhai Connection* (2014); *The Accidental Prime Minister* (2019); *Apharan* (2005)

TWO narratives describe the state of corruption in post-reforms India. The first is the 'Asian Paradox'. Economists found that Asian nations, like India and China, witnessed high growths due to liberalization, which were laced with high rates of corruption. One study showed that between 1996 and 2011, a sample of seven Asian countries witnessed average annual growth that was eight times the figure for a sample of seven African nations. Both the samples had similar corruption levels.

Over time, the 'Asian Paradox' became the 'Global Exception', as this shadowy link between growth and corruption was noticed in countries in other continents. This befuddled experts, as reforms were meant to ring in higher transparency. If this didn't happen, what is the difference between the clean invisible hand of capitalism, and the rotted arms of socialism?

Hence, the intelligent brains went into an overdrive to pinpoint the reasons for such discrepancies. One view for the cause-and-effect was that it was "complicated, indirect, time-variant, and non-linear". It implied that the connections between growth and corruption were not straightforward, and the second did not follow from the first.

For instance, the reforms may be implemented in phases; some areas are more open than the others. Pro-reformers like columnist Swaminathan Aiyar argued that "areas that were comprehensively liberalized saw the disappearance of corruption". Those that weren't, or the sunrise sectors that witnessed the first whiffs of reforms, witnessed scandals.

When the Licence-Permit-Quota Raj was dismantled, private businesses were free to expand and enter new segments. Entry was automatic in most cases. The illegal premiums due to entry barriers – in the form of bribes and illegal donations to politicians and political parties – came down. The limits on size of a company or business group vanished.

According to the Economic Survey (2019-20), the ease of doing business was evident from the number of new firms registered each year. The CAGR was 3.8% between 2006 and 2014, and more than trebled to 12.2% between 2014 and 2018. In 2014, 70,000 new firms were set up, which shot up to 124,000 in 2018. Obviously, the transition year, 2014 in this case, was defined by politics, and not economics. But the figures do tell a positive story about reforms.

But it is also true that there were still central and state permissions that businesses needed. These became sources of corruption, two of the primary ones being environment and land acquisition. Politicians found new ways, or sharpened old ways, to extract rents from the industry. In many cases, both the Center and states were forced by politics and legal reasons (court orders) to stall and delay licences for years, or say no to applicants.

Discretion became the norm in sunrise sectors. The same was true when the governments allocated the scarce natural resources. In areas such as telecom, coal, and oil and gas, scams reached unimaginable proportions. When CAG exposed the political shenanigans, it led to public anger, and electoral shocks.

In areas, where the private and state-owned firms competed with each other, the discriminatory attitude enabled the policy makers to play favorites. Private players made hay as the public sector crept into the shadows. The monopolies of the state-owned units were dismantled, but distributed unfavorably to benefit a few private players.

Since wealth was largely generated through 'paper' variants or stocks, the rise in stock indices was touted as another success of the reforms. As Indian equities attracted foreign and local investors, the Sensex doubled to 10,000 points within 80 months, according to above-quoted Economic Survey. From there, the journey to 15,000 took less than 20 months, and the index was at 20,000 within a few more months.

Thanks to the Global Financial Crisis, it took another 80 months to reach 25,000. Another 15,000 points, till 40,000, were added in less than 70 months. As the Survey claimed, "Note that the acceleration in the Sensex was not due to the base effect. In fact, higher acceleration stemmed from higher CAGR." The higher the level of the index, the faster it grew. The virtual wealth multiplied at higher rates over the past few decades.

Most investors contend that this rise was punctuated by illegalities, which pushed it downwards for periods that ranged from a few months to a few years. It wasn't a one-way ride to the heavenly abode of wealth. It was a roller coaster one and, during the steep downsides, people lost their shirts and trousers. Wealth creation existed side-by-side with wealth destruction.

One can, therefore, conclude that the experiences of reforms, businesses, wealth, and corruption were mixed across sectors and segments. The same was true about trade policies, i.e. exports and imports. There were areas, such as textiles, electronics, and gold, where smuggling, generally by the mafia, died a natural death. There were others, like software, petrochemicals, and telecom, where the illicit businesses boomed.

However, as I mentioned earlier, reforms, along with other reasons, destroyed several mafia businesses. Many dons fled the country. This led to fissures, and encouraged new players to enter the underworld, and the smaller ones to expand their territories. Competition between gangsters intensified.

Company (2002), a Bollywood flick, shows many of these aspects. Chandu (Vivek Oberoi) rises from the bottom, and gets close to Don Malik (Ajay Devgn). The two begin to eliminate rivals, and both police officers and politicians are entangled in the process. A 'political' contract pulls Chandu and Malik apart; they become enemies. The once all-powerful Company is divided into two factions, just like what happened to Dawood's D-Company after the 1993 Mumbai bomb blasts.

As the two gangs go on a killing spree, this time against each other, it forces the leaders to leave the country. In Kenya, Malik's assassins attack Chandu, who survives. The police rope in Chandu to carry on the war against Malik. But the two gangsters come to a truce. Malik is however murdered in Hong Kong. Shocked at the news, the latter surrenders and is imprisoned. Of course, in the process, the Company dies.

In *Satya* (1998), the focus is on shooters. But this is also a tale of how the Mumbai underworld became fragmented and competitive in the 1990s. Whether it is legal or illegal business, monopolies are sustained by high entry barriers, which kill competition. Once reforms make it easier for new businesses, more players can take on established names, and displace them.

Satya, like *Company*, explores gang wars and the nexus between politics and underworld. Bhiku Mhatre (Manoj Bajpayee) is on the upswing, and Satya (JD Chakravarthy) is his brain. They are at loggerheads with a gang of Guru Narayan's (Raju Mavani). Despite a truce called by a local politician, Bhau Thakurdas (Govind Namdev), the Mhatre-Satya duo kills Narayan. After an electoral victory, thanks to Mhatre, Bhau shoots him for disobeying orders.

Bollywood examined the links between mafia and politics from the perspective of police's 'Encounter Specialists', who were reviled and revered. Many felt they got rid of the 'garbage' (criminals). Others spoke of false encounters and human rights. Both were true, and encounters were used as a ruse by politicians and police officers to pursue their personal interests.

Ab Tak Chappan (2004) looks at these issues. The police commissioner orders the encounter of the top 'Encounter Cop', Sadhu Agashe (Nana Patekar). Another encounter specialist is killed by colleagues. A few officers resign, and expose their chief's links with the underworld. Sadhu, who was earlier asked by the chief to kill people close to one of the two rival mafia groups, becomes a fugitive, and seeks the help of a don.

During a candid talk between Sadhu and his junior, the former admits that they cannot question the orders from the 'top'. If they are asked to go for the kill, they have to 'encounter' the targets. Sometimes, they get a good chief. Sometimes, they don't, and a gang gains at the other's expense.

For the real dons, who were scattered across Asia – Middle East to Malaysia – in the 1990s, there were three options. One was to consolidate the Indian fragments. Two was to enter new areas and expand fledgling ones. Finally, it was imperative to set up legitimate global businesses.

Expectedly, they pursued the three choices together. In an oblique manner, *Mumbhai Connection* (2014) portrays encounters between legal and illegal businesses. An out-of-job IT salesman in the US meets a recruiter for a new IT start-up. Little does the former realize that the job entails selling IT services to the Atlanta Mafia!

The filmmaker said that being in a full-time job as an IT professional, he had to balance work and film, including recruitment for the latter. Most actors had regular jobs and, hence, shoots happened on weekends. The shots in café and nightclub were taken overnight over 17-hour stretches. Friends and colleagues were roped in as actors, and their homes and cars were used for scenes. The filmmaker admitted that his engineering manager at work played the role of an Italian mafia don.

Policy makers resorted to duplicity, and their actions were not pro-market but pro-business. Their acts helped the growth of specific private players

Playing multiple roles and adopting multiple identities were integral part of a reforms-driven society. When policy makers were forced to implement decisions that encouraged the role and rule of the markets, they did it with duplicity. Since 1991, "the Indian state created and implemented policies," wrote Jai Bhatia, PhD researcher at University of London, "that were pro-business rather than pro-market". This changed the narrative.

In practice, the state "did not retreat from the forefront of the economy or cede allocation decisions to market but instead repeatedly intervened to support the growth of private businesses," added Bhatia. This was true in the sunrise sectors, where new laws were scripted, and it was easier to skew them in favor of certain parties. The state had an excuse: it went through the policy learning curve, and made changes accordingly.

Unlike the past, i.e. until the 1980s, it wasn't the Center that forced these actions. The powers of the state governments to bend, twist, and influence policies increased, and went in sync with reforms. This was aided by the rise of the regional political parties, which played crucial roles in the formation of national governments since the 1990s. There was a shift in the corruption epicenter – from the Center to states.

Between the late eighties and the middle of the second decade in this century, central coalition governments ruled. The regional parties were part of governance, and demanded their pound of flesh. They were keen to make money quickly, not knowing when they would be ejected out of power. "They institutionalized mechanisms to veto national parties, which wished to intervene in the former's illegalities," wrote a critic.

The process continued, and took a U-Turn in 2014, when the BJP won with a majority. This was repeated in 2019, and resulted in re-centralization of policies. New Delhi followed the Moscow model, devised by Vladimir Putin. Russia, in the recent past, transformed "an oligarch independent of and more powerful than the state into a corporatist structure in which oligarchs served at the pleasure of state officials," wrote academic Karen Dawisha.

Hence, there was a two-way vertical movement in the corruption flows. The first was from the Center to states. And the second was back to the Center, which realigned the equations and sponsored the past oligarchs, who had earlier received the blessing of a specific state. It was as if corruption became democratized and expanded downwards, and then retreated. This was evident in telecom, mining, and environment.

When the eight mobile licences in the four metros were auctioned in the early 1990s, there were pulls and pressures to favor some applicants. This was evident from the treatment to the two south-based bidders, Rajeev Chandrasekhar, son-in-law of the BPL family, and C Sivasankaran of Sterling Computers, who was under the CBI scanner. BPL slugged it out in the courts, and Siva's licence was shifted to a new city.

During the reign of Atal Bihari Vajpayee (1998-2004), the landline players were allowed the last-mile wireless connectivity to expedite telephone connections. Either unwittingly or deliberately, the landline operators used legal loopholes to offer mobile national services on roaming basis (you could carry the handset wherever you travelled).

Manmohan Singh headed two regimes between 2004 and 2014. Regional partners grabbed the telecom portfolio, and instigated the 2G scam. Licences were given on first-come first-served basis, but applicants broke the queue, and got spectrum allocation quickly. The spectrum was given at cheap prices, and CAG calculated that the presumptive loss to the exchequer was a whopping Rs 1.76 trillion.

A wave of mergers and takeovers ensured that three players consolidated market shares. It was a case of an oligopoly with monopolistic intentions. This was the classic 'Rule of Three', which states that there are three dominant competitors in a mature market. Bhatia said that the shift from first-come first-served to auctions led firms "to take on progressively more debt".

Journalist-author M Rajshekhar wrote that in coal mining, we "handed close to half of India's coal reserves to a handful of families and pushed the country towards oligarchic future". The desire to maximize "political rent" led to crony capitalism. The author added that companies with political links got the allocations, and so did many others. What mattered was the firms' willingness to pay. This pattern – favors for cash – repeated in other areas.

Let us look at environmental clearances. At both the central and states' levels, this emerged as a money spinner. Since clearances were mandatory, the regional coalition partners wrangled for this portfolio at the Center, and earned rents. The bigger the project, the larger were the bribes. They were calculated in terms of a percentage (usually 5%) of the project costs.

Once re-centralization gained ascendancy, environment laws were eased, and India Inc was freed from their shackles. The logic was that these rules impeded development, as they delayed projects. According to experts, this was a sequence in a chain of events that led from illicit rent extraction, where firms paid one-time upfront money, to rent sharing, when the state shares private firms' ongoing supernormal profits.

Policy fiddles were common in oil and gas, and infrastructure. Gold-plating was the preferred route. Oil and gas fields were initially leased to the private sector on cost-plus basis. This implied that the private party first recovered the huge costs it incurred on exploration, and shared the remaining revenues with the state. Costs were padded and gold-plated.

This was common in infrastructure, as the state financed a part of costs under PPP (Public Private Partnership) model. If costs were inflated, the government's share was higher, which helped the private partner to reduce its share. On paper, both parties made contributions. In reality, the private player did not spend a penny since the costs were hiked by multiple times. There was no mechanism to monitor costs, and expenditures at the ground level.

Recentralization and courts forced a change from the cost-plus blueprint to a revenue-share one. The latter strategy seemed reasonable and favorable to the government. But the developments in telecom proved that even this can be rigged. For two decades, the telecom firms refused to include several components in their revenues to calculate the government's share. This was disputed in the courts; private firms lost.

It is evident to any outsider that these scandals cut across regimes. But Manmohan Singh's UPA emerged as the main culprit because two of the biggest scams – 2G and coal blocks allocation – became public during its two tenures. No wonder that there is a Hindi movie, *The Accidental Prime Minister* (2019), which focuses on India's ace, but disgraced, reformer.

Not many doubted Manmohan's integrity. A review in the *Indian Express* said, "The film is careful to underlie that Singh was honorable, upright and personally incorruptible, but he overlooked the corruption of his party colleagues, and was paralyzed because of the far-reaching influence of the (Gandhi) Family. Even political newbies are aware of this narrative, and *The Accidental Prime Minister* doesn't have any breaking headlines…."

Hence, there were unanswered questions as to why Singh did not resign in the wake of these scandals. It was discussed at social gatherings and cocktail parties. Sanjay Baru, a journalist who was the prime minister's media advisor during the first tenure, speculated about the issue in his book, *The Accidental Prime Minister*, on which the movie is based.

"Speculation was rife that all was not well. When a family friend of Rahul (Gandhi), working as an analyst with a foreign consulting firm, put out a paper suggesting that Singh had become a liability for the government, the Delhi Durbar was agog with speculation. Was this a message from the family itself? After a series of other humiliations many wondered why Singh was not calling it a day," wrote Baru. Since he was not with Singh when the scams broke out, his answers too are in the form of questions.

Baru questioned, "Should he have resigned at the first whiff of scandal, owning moral responsibility for the corruption of others, instead of defending the government? Perhaps. Could he have resigned? Maybe not. The party would have hounded him for 'letting it down.'"

Despite the scandals, the planets were in alignment for regional parties. Even as they gained from the downward vertical movement of corruption, other developments benefitted them. The first was that they became entrenched in their respective states. They were not answerable to the Center and, in fact, reaped extra advantages as central coalition partners.

Although the approvals for businesses were automatic in several sectors, the companies had to seek state-level permissions for water, electricity, land, raw materials, and so on. These aren't easy. In the case of environment, the local authorities have powers to derail projects. District officers have immense powers to influence businesses in sensitive areas, like the eastern 'Red Belt'.

Simultaneously, the regional parties appropriated other mechanisms within the state to collect ill-gotten wealth. Local resources are an example. They are available at the district levels, and result in bribery and illegal businesses at the local levels, especially in areas such as sandalwood, red sanders, and animal poaching. The chief ministers and their cronies took them over, as corruption moved from the districts to state capitals.

Liberalization gave a free rein to urbanization. Frenetic construction offered openings to officials to dole out favors to the ambitious and crooked realtors. Over time, the decisions to spur physical growth were taken over by the chief ministers. Their offices helped the builders to get the contracts. Author-journalist Bhavdeep Kang wrote about the three models of constructed corruption, which pushed small-time realtors on to the national stage.

The first happened when contractors bought large tracts of agriculture land from the farmers at throwaway prices. Later, the land use was converted for residential and commercial use, which resulted in sudden jumps in rates. By the time the plots were sold, the difference in the prices was 10-15 times.

Second, the state government purchased land from the farmers in the name of public interest, i.e. to build infrastructure. The same were sold to private parties, and land use changed. Yet again, there was a spurt in prices. Only when the Supreme Court intervened did the practices stop.

Genuine public projects like highways and airports require land. But if the realtors know about their routes and locations, they are in a position to buy property along or near them. Once the project takes off, the land prices zoom. The builders can change routes and locations. In Haryana, they got the "alignment of the Dwarka Expressway changed... at the last minute".

J Jeyaranjan, an economist, wrote how sand mining, a local business in the 1980s, grabbed the attention of the political rulers in Tamil Nadu. The two regional parties saw the operations as "arenas for ever greater displays of muscle power, political power and money, by means of which competition was elbowed out," he wrote. Politicians and political parties viewed sand mining with greater interest due to the intensive construction in cities and towns.

"Disputes over sand mining, among small-time local politicians attracted the attention of the highest-level politicians, who gauged the potential for money in sand from the intensity of such disputes," explained Jeyaranjan. The state-level politicians co-opted the district-level ones, and protected them from police, judiciary, and local agencies. The scale of the business increased several times. The authorities “sensed the profit”, and demanded “regular and increasing levels of bribes”.

Criminals involved in sand mining in Uttar Pradesh joined the regional and national parties, and straddled two illegal-legal roles. Together, they mapped spaces where, wrote UCL’s professor Lucia Michelutti, “organized crime, informal networks and a plethora of actors meet”. Together, a “competing mafia raj” emerged that was “triggered by the coexistence of multiple and competing centers of power, which tend to clash”.

Apart from Uttar Pradesh, the illicit business expanded to Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Haryana, and Delhi NCR, which were big markets for the sand. Such inter-state links were witnessed in the smuggling of red sanders, a species of sandalwood. The wood from former Andhra Pradesh is taken by road to ports in Chennai, Kochi, Kolkata and Mumbai. It is then shipped or airlifted to countries like China.

“Small criminals – loosely related to political parties or the Maoist guerrilla – entered into the red sanders business at the end of the 1990s,” wrote anthropologist David Pricherit. When regional politicians became the chief ministers of Andhra Pradesh, it acquired the nature of “real big business”.

Locals that Pricherit spoke to warned him not to get involved as chief ministers, and their families, were involved. “No one can make a direct link between the sanders’ criminals and politicians; they use their party workers, their henchmen but they never involve directly,” said one. “Nobody will talk about red sanders. This is power, and everybody fears them,” said another.

Bollywood movie, *Apharan* (2005), exemplifies how the state’s political actors consolidate the fledgling and fragmented illegal businesses. In this case it is the kidnapping operations; one of the masterminds is Tabrez Alam (Nana Patekar), an MLA and powerful leader of the Muslim community. Ajay (Ajay Devgn), an unemployed graduate who vainly aspires to join the police, joins his gang, and helps in the murders of the smaller players.

Alam’s political ambitions are clear when he tries to bring down the state’s home minister; he wishes to introduce a no-confidence motion in the assembly against the ruling regime. It will pave the way for his ascent to power. The home minister clicks a deal with Alam, and they decide to form the government together. Ajay surrenders, and gives evidence against the gangster-MLA, but his efforts are ruined by the political realignments.

CHAPTER 15

OYE LUCKY LUCKY OYE!

We are conmen in our own ways.
This is true about the rich and middle classes.
We are hypocrites, and have double standards
when we judge ourselves and others.
We blame the socio-economic classes above us.

Movies: *Bunty Aur Babli* (2005);
Oye Lucky Lucky Oye! (2008)

LET'S get this straight. Most of us are cons. There is a bit of Bunty, Babli, and Lucky in us – either hidden in corners, or openly visible. As corporate employees, we fudge our travel, food and overtime bills. We don't like to return unspent daily allowances. We avoid, not evade, as much tax as is possible. We don't ask for purchase invoices to save on taxes. It comes naturally to us.

It doesn't matter where we stand in the corporate hierarchy. From the lowest to highest, there are manipulations and forgeries to make more money. It is surprising, sometimes shocking that the higher we are, the more is our propensity to cheat. Managers and CEOs, who earn millions a year, yearn to make that extra Rs 100,000. We select vendors, not just on merit and quality, but on the basis of illegal commissions they can pay.

Possibly, this is the overriding reason that explains the huge box-office successes of two Hindi movies, *Bunty Aur Babli* (2005), and *Oye Lucky Lucky Oye!* (2008). The three protagonists – Bunty (Abhishek Bachchan), Babli (Rani Mukherji), and Lucky (Abhay Deol) – are con artists, but their reasons to become one are unusual. They don't scam people because they hail from poor families, are starving, and in need of money.

Babli and Bunty represent India's aspirers. Both are from the villages in Uttar Pradesh, but wish to get out of their stifling settings, and make it big in a metro like Mumbai. They dream, they want to soar, and they hope to go beyond what their parents have done. They hope to become rich, and flaunt their wealth. They feel that they can become part of the rags-to-riches stories.

However, their families are not poor. They are part of the rural middle class (or lower middle class). Babli is a carefree, wild, ambitious, and confident woman who wants to become Miss India. Bunty abhors a 9-to-5 job, like his father has, and wants to be a businessman. He is brimming with ideas.

Their lives as cons begin with being conned. When a swindler steals Bunty's idea, the duo decides to take revenge. They sell a scheme that promises to treble money in three months, and rip off Rs 15,000 from the fraudster. Since it is easy money, it becomes a habit and profession, and a source of happiness. They change disguises – become food inspectors and tourism officials to hoodwink people. They offer the iconic Taj Mahal on lease.

No one knows them because of their masks. JCP Dashrath (Amitabh

Bachchan), who pursues them, feels there are two kinds of people – one who do the same work through their lives, and those who do different kinds in one life. Babli and Bunty represent the latter. The deception describes them, for they have multiple identities – even their names, Babli and Bunty, are unreal.

Although fiddlers like them existed since the beginning of civilization – some big, others small – these two protagonists are products of reforms. Until the 1980s, the majority of Indians behaved like JCP Dashrath's first kind. Most accepted what they had, and worked diligently to incrementally change their lives over decades. From the 1990s onwards, we wanted huge changes, and we felt that we were equipped to make them.

In several interviews, 'The Making of Bunty Aur Babli', the filmmaker and cast reiterated this. Amitabh said that Babli and Bunty epitomized the existing culture among youth. His son, Abhishek, added that youngsters feel the way he does in the movie. As I said earlier, there is a Babli and Bunty inside us.

Lucky too is the child of liberalization. He is a victim of peer pressure. One of the facets of reforms is that it made us aware of how the top sliver lives. It was through media, and what we saw around us. As teenagers and youngsters, we wanted to ape what others had achieved.

One cannot fault Lucky, who sees teenagers like him in Rs 5 million-car and wants to ride in it. He longs to give expensive greeting cards to his girlfriend, and spend Rs 350 on a lunch with her. Since his father cannot afford these 'luxuries' – he cannot even buy a scooter or motorcycle – he figures out other ways to do so. Stealing, either from parents, or from others, is an option. This embarks him on a dishonest journey.

Like the two Bs, Lucky does it because it is pleasurable, and he can pull it off without a sweat. One of Lucky's dialogues in the movie is that he does it for fun. Obviously, it's for money too, which allows him to buy a suit on a whim, and enter elite pubs. His penchant for burglaries is like our passion for art, music and books. It gives him comfort and enjoyment.

Remember, how he watches a news channel anchor, Babul Awasthi, criticize his misdeeds. On a quirk, just for the heck of it, he robs the journalist's house. When Lucky's friend and partner-in-crime, Bangali (Manu Rishi), warns that their victim is a journalist, the prompt and unflappable reply is, "We will be famous." When Bangali incredulously asks if Lucky will open a restaurant, his response is, "Can't I?"

Money and fame can combine in irresistible ways, and overpower a person in reprehensible manner. There is a scene in OLLO, where Lucky re-meets Bengali after a gap, and two go out for lunch at a fancy hotel. A guest relation person hovers around them in a bid to sell a membership card. She knows Lucky, who is a regular. And she leaves with a jocular warning that she will get him to become a member the next time.

When he meets Sonal (Neetu Chandra), his girlfriend, for the first time, he doesn't try to hide who he is and what he does. He reveals that he is in a stolen Mercedes – Lucky and Bangali pronounce the brand name in a funny way – and that his name is not Vinod Khanna, but Lucky.

Despite the differences between Babli and Bunty on one side, and Lucky on the other, there are similarities, and those traits are within us. Like us, they are acquisitive. Their wants are unlimited; they are not restricted by the money they have. This is clear from the posh house that Babli and Bunty reside in, which will put any wealthy family to shame. It is a bit discordant that Babli cleans the house with a vacuum cleaner.

Corruption was sytemic in the 1970s. Even as vices were centralized, they were pervasive. After reforms, bribes were sytematic, i.e. well-oiled and efficient

What can one say about Lucky who, in a spate of audacious robberies across India in cities like Mumbai, Bangalore and Chandigarh, steals 140 TV sets, 212 video cassette recorders, 90 music systems, 475 shirts, 50 jewelry boxes, two dogs, and huge greeting card. He partially hoards them, and sells a part in the black market. It is materialistic possession for its sake. It is like the way we keep books that we never read.

(From the items that Lucky steals, an intelligent reader will comprehend that he is a person from the 1980s, and not 1990s. VCRs became redundant with the advent of Internet in 1995. By the 2000s, entertainment was either on TV, mobile, or laptop. Still, Lucky's persona is akin to someone who lives in the age of reforms.)

Another compelling aspect of Babli, Bunty, and Lucky is how they become a part of the system, and contort it to their benefit. Experts agree that corruption became systemic in India in the 1970s. What they mean is that at one level, there were attempts to centralize the large-scale vices, and at another level, the distortions became pervasive.

In the 1990s, corruption became systematic. Some of the lower-level irregularities, like paying bribes to get a phone or electricity connection, were gone. But in many cases, it became organized, efficient, effective, and well-oiled. This was true of corporate sleaze, as also centralization of corruption by the prime ministers, chief ministers, ministers, and powerful politicians in league with the civil servants and industry.

In the old days, we paid cash to ensure availability of electricity. Each time, there was something wrong, the official from the state distribution company came, and expected his hands to be greased. The same was true for a telephone connection, which was almost impossible to get because of a huge queue. To get anything done, money exchanged hands.

Once reforms kicked in, we entered the phase of '*Batti Gul Meter Chalu*' (Lights off, meter on; 2018). "The principal issue at the heart of the film – the plight of consumers who are at the mercy of unresponsive (private) power industry players in the absence of effective grievance redress mechanism – is undeniably notable. We are well aware how notoriously unreliable *bijli* supply and billing in our cities and towns is," said a review on NDTV. We have power now, but not the power to stop excessive billing. Corruption was more prevalent at the top echelons.

We also accepted corruption as a part of our lives. In the socialist days, we paid the money, but cribbed and complained about it. Since the 1990s, despite reforms that introduced some transparency, as corruption focused on the larger issues, we became active participants.

The three artistes – Babli, Bunty and Lucky – project themselves as integral part of these systems, which helps them to manipulate them. As food inspectors, tourism officials, and employees of the house owners, they establish their right to steal and take bribes. Their victims recognize them as legitimate representatives of illegitimate businesses.

Rent collection, i.e. illegal payments, is so common and regular that no one doubts its legitimacy. It is ironic that in the post-reforms period, when transparency gains importance and corruption reduces, frauds have an uncanny way to become larger. This is acceptable to most, except for the rare whistleblowers and naysayers.

Consider these two scenes from OLLO. When Lucky goes to Sonal's house to have *paranthas*, his lover, who earlier hated him being a thief, seems reconciled. She has no qualms about his profession. Her mother claims that Lucky has transformed their living room into a five-star affair, and wants him to get a toaster – the one that makes bread crisp.

At Lucky's chance meeting with Dr BD Handa, they discuss a news item about a theft. The former tells the latter that the person who hoodwinks the police by claiming to be actor Chunky Pandey's brother stole the car from superstar Shah Rukh Khan's house. Handa is surprised, but no red flags go up. He assumes that Lucky is in the media or celebrity business.

Hence, in the post-reforms era, the lines between black and white, truth and false, and good and bad blur. These opposites are two sides of the liberalization coin, which coexist comfortably with each other. The honest becomes dishonest within minutes, and reverts back to the original state. In effect, we are mostly grey, and choose our moments of blacks and whites in the manner that we decide to.

Who are we? Who am I? These existential questions either don't bother us, or make us think in unique ways. Am I a clean journalist, who is willing to pay a commission to get my house registered because it is in semi-legal *Lal Dora* land? Am I the cricketer, who becomes a whistleblower for match fixing because I am thrown out of the team?

I am sure that we straddle these contradictions with aplomb, ease, and comfort. We don't realize that these are problem areas. When things affect us personally, there is no harm in skirting the laws, or cutting a few corners. More importantly, we blame the villains, whose scams are bigger than us.

Adam Smith looked at the invisible hand in many ways. It relates to the market, and is also "theistic", or the "hand of nature and of providence"

As we swim through the reforms-generated waves, we put our destinies in the 'Invisible Hand' of the market. Economist Adam Smith used the phrase thrice. In *The Wealth of Nations*, it may have referred to the economic market. In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, the mysterious arm was "theistic", or the "hand of nature and of providence". Smith felt self-interest has to be restrained by morals.

Friedrich Hayek and others knew that if our actions are motivated by self-interest only, morality will become the means to achieve these objectives. The chances were that greed would emerge as the new Goddess, and wealth the modern God, and both would ride the chariot of market. This could destroy not just human beings, but civilizations. In most nations, pure and naked capitalism spawned inequalities, and restricted wealth creation to a select group(s).

For example, markets result in equal chances for people to make money. But they are cyclical, and go through churns, which destroy wealth at faster paces. Only those, who are rich, survive these gyrations. Some even gain. The others, most of the beneficiaries and hopefuls, are hurt the most. This enhances the inequalities. Every capitalist crisis makes people poorer than what they were – and only those at the top of the wealth pyramid can absorb the shocks.

Businesses adapt to competition and markets in varying ways. Several decades ago, economist Joseph Schumpeter said that it was innovation that drove corporate evolution and entrepreneurship. Later, Boyan Javonovic and others focused on passive learning, which implies that the newcomers learn on the job, and react to noisy information and market signals. The first is disruptive. The second is a slower process.

Usually, the innovators are rare, and most get killed or absorbed by the powerful incumbents. Most businesses don't have the time to wait-and-watch, and learn. They are pressures to perform. Hence, there is a tendency to seek shortcuts, some of which may border on illegalities.

The sum of these reactions is captured by David Wootton in his book, *Power, Pleasure, and Profit*. He wrote, "Traditional concepts of honor and virtue all require restraint… but the new philosophy… sets no limit to self-interested or selfish conduct…. What power, pleasure, profit… have in common is that the pursuit of them is endless. As these insatiable appetites become respectable, curiosity and ambition – equally unlimited – were reinterpreted as virtues."

When this happens, society is corrupted. We acquire shades and contours of Babli, Bunty and Lucky. Most of us don't become out-and-out conmen and con-women like them. But many of us are unable to distinguish between our actions. Did we do something to deliberately harm another person in our unabashed pursuit of wealth? Or is this the unintended consequence of living in a world that is lorded by competition, markets, ambition, and wealth?

Post Script: According to several media reports, *Bunty Aur Babli* led to real-life crimes, as couples (married ones and sister-brother-in-law duo) emulated their strategies. Using disguises, Shahnaaz Bano (40) and her BIL Sajid Ahmed (25) looted jewelry and diamonds from showrooms in the cities in Uttar Pradesh. They owned properties worth millions of rupees in Bijnore and Saharanpur. Shahnaaz was caught, when she was captured on CCTV camera.

The Darjeeling-based couple, Kajal Dhillon (28), and her husband, Sushant (38), made a mockery of two Archies outlets in Delhi, including the one at the reputed Connaught Place market. They used similar styles, as was shown in the movie. Both were arrested by the police. Another couple admitted to their crimes in the same fashion as the reel characters, Babli and Bunty did – we don't know if a 'dashing' police officer like Dashrath was involved in this case.

CHAPTER 16

NEW MONEY-GO-ROUNDS

Domestic black money goes out and, instead of being hidden in tax havens, makes round trips back to India. The judiciary sticks to laws, which are made by those who remain unruffled. It's a trippy experience.

Movies: *Gupt* (1997); *Deewaar* (1975); *Don* (1978)

THERE are two recurring trends in Hindi movies. The first, which is recent and began in the 1990s, portrays the influx of foreign investments in the country. After India adopted reforms, foreigners and NRIs queued up to pump money into businesses, stock markets, and purchase of other assets like real estate. The second that dates from the 1970s shows the proclivity among rich Indians to route out vast amounts of domestic black money to foreign bank accounts.

Not many remember the spiel that Kapil, the protagonist of *Upstarts*, launches into to convince a multi-billionaire Japanese to invest money in his start-up. A review of the movie said that Kapil asked for financial support "without mentioning the data and figures, but with his heart-touching story about how he came up with the idea of launching such an app". The movie was launched in 2019; by then, investors sought any reason, even an emotional one, to be a part of the India story.

In their paper on how Bollywood reflected the changes in political economy, Amir Ullah Khan and Bibek Debroy, singled out *Gupt* (1997), and said that the movie "must be mentioned in the context of the liberalization of the Indian economy". They explained that it was not "a paean to the virtues of liberalization and globalization", but a "racy whodunit". But a scene stands out as a classic debate on foreign investment – *Swadeshi* versus *Videshi*.

A meeting is attended by the governor, politicians, sidekicks, industrialists, moneybags, go-betweens, and union leaders. The topic: open-door policy which, said the two academics, is euphemism for reforms. The debate is between a votary for investments, and one who stands up for labor.

Foreign money, the first says, will "strengthen the economy". The governor agrees that the dollars will prop up the exchange rate. The champion of labor worries about India's "sovereignty", and argues that the foreigners will make us a "slave country" again. The first contends that such a view smacks of "regressive and right-wing thinking". The second shouts that his opponent is a "pimp", who will sell India for a "fistful of dollars".

Such debates, the authors concluded, are "replayed in Parliament even today whenever the issue of deregulating a certain sector comes up". The focus on AtmaNirbhar Bharat to counter Chinese imports and investments is an indicator that the dispute rages on.

But even as foreign money flows in, we believe that wealthy Indians stack massive sums in illegal foreign bank accounts. This was true before reforms, when the chosen destination was Switzerland. It was truer after reforms, when the locations shifted to other tax havens such as Mauritius, Panama, Isle of Man, and Lichtenstein, as also Dubai, London, and Singapore.

BJP's LK Advani stated that a trillion dollars were hidden in covert foreign accounts. Several governments promised to bring this back. Efforts failed. There were reports of more money flying out of the country. Indians legally transferred their wealth abroad, either as foreign citizens or tax residents.

Between 1971 and 1986, wrote Meenakshi Rishi and James K Boyce, the mis-invoicing of Indian foreign trade was \$21.1 billion (in 1986 dollars), and amounted to \$28.6 billion with "imputed interest earnings". This capital flight from trade misdemeanors did not include smuggling. Mis-invoicing implies showing imports to be more expensive – the difference is transferred by the sellers to buyers' secret accounts – and exports to be understated – the difference never reaches the Indian shores.

Ila Patnaik and Deepa Vasudevan found that the \$16.6 billion fled India between 1990-91 and 1996-97, i.e. the first few years after reforms. In 2016, Global Financial Integrity estimated that trade mis-invoicing cost India \$13 billion annually. Of this, the majority, or \$9 billion was due to under-invoicing of imports. This wasn't money that went out; it was lost as unpaid taxes such as Custom (\$2 billion), VAT (\$3.4 billion), and corporate tax (\$3.6 billion).

Hindi films told the audience about the funds rushing out of the country – what economists call capital flight. In the older films, underworld villains (like Ajit) are involved in cross-border smuggling, mostly of gold, and it is assumed that they pay by money kept in foreign accounts. Anti-heroes (Amitabh in *Deewaar* and *Don*) do the same. In *Don*, the kingpin is an Interpol operative.

In *Pagalpanti*, there is a discussion about Niraj Modi, who dupes an Indian bank, and runs away with the money. What Bollywood couldn't grasp, and the realization eluded us, was that the two trends of foreign inflows and outflows converged in the post-reforms period. Indians gaily generated black money, both in India and abroad, and kept it in secret foreign accounts in tax havens. But simultaneously, they brought it back disguised as foreign investments.

In 2019, the Swiss authorities disclosed – albeit under diplomatic pressure – that Indians held a mere billion dollars in their banks. It was minuscule compared to Advani's trillion dollars. The highest amount that was ever stashed in their accounts was just over \$3 billion and that too in 2006. This implied that either Indians had spent their savings, shifted to other tax havens, or the money flew back to the home country.

Until the 1980s – Rajiv Gandhi did cut duties in some areas – the tax rates were high. There was a reason to keep money hidden, rather than give it to the government. The cash stashed in foreign accounts, which earned zero or minimal returns, helped the evaders to fund their lifestyles during their trips abroad, and buy assets like real estate, planes, and yatch.

After reforms, businesses, stock market, and real estate boomed. The returns on investments in India were 20-30% a year. If the wealth that was lying around in foreign accounts could be brought back legally, the rich could become richer. They had to hide the origins of the money. Reforms led to legitimate ways to do so through banking channels.

Now, it's time for the next question – how. One option to turn the black money into white was to re-route it back to India through tax havens. These havens offer secrecy, hide the sources, and allow it to be invested across borders at zero taxes. It was a perfect way for what the experts dub as round-tripping. In a 2019 paper, BK Pandey said that it was the process to "take funds out… and then bring them back in the form of foreign investment".

Foreign investment can be used to start businesses, and to buy existing ones through M&As. Both these choices were available. Funds were also used to buy Indian equities, and other financial papers. For decades, Mauritius was the favorite haven for both honest and unscrupulous investors. The neighbor became the subcontinent's financial hub.

Official estimates (2019) said that half of the investment in business, and a quarter of inflows into stocks came through Mauritius and Singapore. Pandey found that Mauritius accounted for a third of direct investment between April 2000 and March 2019. Between 2000 and 2016, it was responsible for a fifth of the foreign inflows into stocks. In 2007, IMF said that financial instruments, like Participatory Notes (PNs), allowed "round-tripping of copious monies".

PNs were the best way to hide the origins. They had no legal sanctity in India, but were issued by foreign institutions that were registered with SEBI. The nameless and faceless buyers pumped in cash through PNs, which was used to buy Indian equities. PNs were rampantly used by dodgy and wealthy Indians, as well as legal global hedge funds, which thrive on secrecy.

GDRs and ADRs, i.e. sale of shares by Indian firms in the European and American stock exchanges, respectively, emerged as an option to re-route illgotten wealth. Early on in this century, the family members of a business group with interests in liquor used it. Higro Trading and Orissa Holdings, which were allegedly owned by the patriarch and based in the British Virgin

Islands, a tax haven, held 25 million and one million shares, respectively, in the India-based parent company.

Finance ministers were aware of these shenanigans. But they turned a blind eye. In a candid moment, one of the FMs told me, "How does it matter which channel the money comes through, and what is its color – black, white, or grey – as long as the flow is inwards. We need foreign exchange; the 1990 crisis was due to forex shortage."

Hence, in 1994, the government issued Circular 1, which stated that the Mauritius-based entities could pay taxes as per that country's laws. It meant zero taxes. Circular 2 (2000) legitimized this. A parliamentary committee, which investigated the Ketan Parekh scam in early 2000s, admitted that there was "misuse of the Mauritius route". It did not recommend action as similar clauses existed in bilateral treaties that India signed with several nations, including Mauritius.

When in moments of truths, the FMs tried to block inflows, they were forced on the back foot by the investors. The scary investors dumped Indian stocks, which tanked the indices. Frightened of such slumps, the FMs retreated. Budget 2013 aimed to tighten the norms, but the finance ministry was forced to clarify that the new law "would not affect the Mauritius route". The proposed law "never saw the light of the day".

It was an intriguing thought: how to tax a deal that was signed abroad, but was about Indian assets? It took three decades to resolve the tricky issue

Sadly, the court orders went in favor of the investors. Researcher Sanjay Kumar Yadav wrote that in the seminal Azadi Bachao Andolan case (2003), the Supreme Court ruled that the bilateral treaties between two nations, like India and Mauritius, allowed investors to use the route. The motives were "irrelevant", and would not "affect the legality of the transaction". If the treaties allowed it, there was no problem.

Later, in 2012, the apex court stopped the government from imposing taxes on cross-border business deals. The tax agencies argued in vain that in cross-border M&A deals (India-Mauritius), it was imperative for the buyer to deposit tax deducted at source as per Indian laws. The logic: assets and operations of the firms were based in India, although the deals were conducted among Mauritius-based entities.

The government was caught in a tax typhoon. Several companies that had earlier paid taxes in cross-border deals asked the authorities to refund them.

It implied a huge loss to the exchequer. A slew of changes were enacted, and some from retrospective effect to prevent it. As expected, anger, repulsion and disgust consumed the investors.

Finally, in 2017, new laws came into force to sidetrack the Mauritius gravy train. Two issues were critical. The first was that the foreign entities had to be residents, and not shelf companies. The second was that if the tax agencies decided that deals were designed only to avoid taxes, they could force companies to pay taxes. Investors got a two-year reprieve.

Despite these debates, as well as legal changes, the public continued to believe in the one-way flow of the black money – from India to foreign accounts. The biggest example of this inability to understand the money-go-round is the Panama Papers scandal, which was based on leaks from the world's fourth largest offshore law firm, Mossack Fonseca.

A whistleblower handed over 2,600 GB of data, which included 11 million files on 214,000 hidden companies with possible slush funds in secret accounts, to the media. The data included emails, spreadsheets, passports and corporate records, which were made public by a string of global media organization including the *Indian Express* in India.

Russia's Vladimir Putin said that the leaks were an American plot to destabilize his country. It's another matter that his friends allegedly moved $2 billion in Fonseca's accounts. Britain's David Cameroon initially denied and then accepted that he profited from the sale of shares in an offshore trust. Relatives of China's Xi Jinping, Saudi Arabia's King, and prime ministers and presidents of different nations were named.

Yet the Indian media and public, which were excited by the uncovering of foreign accounts in tax havens, failed to notice that there was something amiss. Many Indian accounts were empty and had no money, or had trifling amounts. It was baffling and befuddling.

One could deduce that Mossack Fonseca was not a favorite with the Indians, who kept their money in other offshore destinations. But it was possible that the Indians had invested the money elsewhere. The most probable destination was, of course, the lucrative Indian markets.

In the hoopla of the names that came out, no one asked this pertinent question – why were the amounts so piffling? The same was the case when names came out in the case of other banks, like HSBC, which too helped people, including Indians, to hide their cash. While the rich from other nations had huge sums in the accounts, the Indians had a few million dollars here, and a few millions of dollars there.