

“Changing India”

MUMBAI, India — The first thing I ever learned about India was that my parents had chosen to leave it.

The country was lost to us in America, where I was born. It had to be assembled in my mind, from the fragments of anecdotes and regular journeys east.

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My cousins in India would sometimes ask if I was Indian or American. “American,” I would say, because it was the truth, and because I felt that to say otherwise would be to accept a lower berth¹ in the world. I moved to India six years ago in an effort to understand it on my own terms.

10 India was changing when I arrived and has changed dramatically, viscerally, improbably in these 2,000 days: farms giving way to factories; ultra-cheap cars being built; companies buying out rivals abroad. But the greatest change I have witnessed is elsewhere. It is in the mind: Indians now know that they don’t have to leave, as my parents left, to have their personal revolutions.

15 It took me time to see. At first, I only saw the things I had ever seen: India the frustrating, difficult country.

But as I travelled the land, the data did not fit the framework. The children of the lower castes were hoisting² themselves up one diploma and training program at a time. The women were becoming breadwinners through microcredit and decentralized manufacturing. The young people were finding in
20 their cell phones a first zone of individual identity. The couples were ending marriages no matter what “society” thinks, then finding love again. The vegetarians were embracing meat and meat-eaters were turning vegetarian, defining themselves by taste and faith, not caste.

Indians from languorous villages to pulsating cities were making difficult new choices to die other than
25 where they were born, to pursue vocations not their father’s. And it was addictive, this improbable rush of hope.

The shift is only just beginning. Most Indians still live impossibly grim³ lives. Trickle down⁴, here more than most places, is slow. In Mumbai, about 1 million people live in slums. In addition, some traditions
30 are still important : many women are still forced to marry some men. However, it is a shift in psychologies, and you rarely meet an Indian untouched by it.

Grabbing hold of their destinies, these Indians became the unlikely cousins of my own immigrant
35 parents in America: restless, ambitious, with dreams vivid only to themselves. What has changed since they left is a systemic lifting of the odds for those who stay. It is a milestone in any nation’s life when leaving becomes a choice, not a necessity.

[Indians] no longer angrily berate⁵ America, because they are too busy building their own country. No one asks if I feel Indian or American. How delicious to see that unconcern. How fortunate to live in a
40 land you needn’t leave to become your fullest possible self.

Farewell to an India I hardly Knew (adapted)

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¹ Position

² Se hisser

³ Sombre, maussade

⁴ Les retombées économiques

⁵ Faire des reproches