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India's Economic Miracle Bypasses Poor

Plenty for Few

By Wieland Wagner

3/21/2013



Unlike in China, India's economic miracle has failed to benefit the poor. Instead, the rich are getting richer in this notoriously divided land, and government support fails to reach those in need.

"I'm Princess Shahnaz Husain," India's cosmetics diva says with a hoarse voice as she welcomes guests to her palatial villa in New Delhi and kindly invites them to sit down. Her brown-toned hair is teased into a fiery mane, and her striped red robe glitters just as golden as her high-heeled sandals.

Just a few moments earlier, it seemed unimaginable that anybody could stand out against the florid splendor of this Indian living room. Gilded porcelain swans sparkle under glass coffee tables on Persian carpets. A ceramic dog crouches with its puppies in front of the fireplace. The walls gleam with brightly-colored paintings of floral arrangements in massive, ornate golden frames.

Yet, oddly enough, she alone dominates the entire scene: Princess Shahnaz, who rules over more than 400 beauty salons in India and around the world. Her name adorns beauty creams and shampoos made with ayurvedic medicinal plants, and she sells her products through upmarket stores from London to Tokyo -- in packaging embellished with her image from younger days.

Shahnaz won't reveal her age, but for over four decades she and her company have embodied the Indian economic miracle. Although she grew up in affluent circumstances -- her father was a judge and her mother was allegedly a princess in a royal dynasty -- she owes her commercial success to the rise of India's middle class.

Her customers are primarily nouveau riche Indians. Shahnaz recently began to offer them a miracle cream that is supposed to stop the skin from aging. "That will be a hit," she says.

Shahnaz belongs to India's Muslim minority but, like her fellow Indians who are Hindus, she is making provisions for her life after death by performing good deeds that benefit the poor.

When she is chauffeured through the streets of New Delhi in her silver Rolls-Royce, beggars rush up to the vehicle at each intersection. "They are, of course, familiar with my car," she says "and I always have a few rupees on hand for them."

Recently, she says, she helped a man with no legs begging in front of a traffic light. She arranged a job for him in one of her cosmetics production plants. "I found him a job as a watchman at the gate where he can sit," she says.

Shahnaz tells many such stories. For instance, there is the tale of a female road worker with dark spots on her face, who waited in front of her villa every morning until Shahnaz took pity on her. She gave the poor woman a cream for skin spots -- a product that would be prohibitively expensive for the average Indian. What's more, she financed her education in one of her cosmetics schools.

Even now, during the cold time of the year, the rich philanthropist says she has wool blankets placed at the entrance to her villa for the shivering poor. She sounds as if she were moved by her own efforts to help those less fortunate than herself.

She doesn't see poverty as a specifically Indian problem, though. "There are beggars everywhere in the world," she says, "even in London and Paris."

Growing Prosperity, Persistent Poverty

An analysis by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) finds that the blatant gap between poor and rich is growing in India almost faster than anywhere else on the globe. Although the world's largest democracy amended its constitution in 1976 to declare that it was a socialist state, the fact of the matter is that the country is failing to give the huddled masses a fair share of the country's economic miracle.

This is one of the main differences between India and China, its rival up-and-coming Asian economic powerhouse: In China, some 13 percent of the population subsists on the equivalent of less than \$1.25 (€0.97) a day, while one-third of all Indians have to make do with the same amount.

Experts at the University of Oxford have concluded that the level of poverty in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh is roughly equivalent to that in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the Central African country that has been ravaged by years of civil war. To make matters worse, if the comparison is restricted to nutrition, Madhya Pradesh is significantly worse off than the DRC.

Critics such as Atul Kohli, a political scientist who teaches at Princeton University, contend that India's rapid economic growth, which began in the 1980s, has not led to a decline in poverty. Kohli's 2012 book, "Poverty Amid Plenty in the New India," has attracted worldwide attention.

Shankar Singh is one of those who dreams of a better life in vain. The 53-year-old works a few blocks from Shahnaz' residence as a security guard at Panchsheel Park, an enclave for the rich surrounded by walls and gates. He protects the villa of a Sikh businessman.

Shankar's boss has amassed a fortune selling sinks and toilets, but his security guard still lives with his wife and six children in an impoverished hovel right behind the gated community -- beyond the walls, where stray dogs and cows rummage through the refuse of the rich.

This is where the gardeners, cooks, chauffeurs and chambermaids of the nouveau riche live. Their neighborhood may be in one of Delhi's better slums, but they live in constant fear that they will slide back into abject poverty if they get sick or are fired. According to the results of the OECD analysis, informal jobs without any protection against dismissal are more prevalent in India than in virtually any other emerging economy.

Longing for Home

It is early afternoon, and Shankar is resting in his windowless dwelling in preparation for the night shift. He is wearing the same dark baseball cap he wears on duty. A small Hindu altar hangs on the wall. Shankar worships the god Shiva, the "auspicious one," who brings good fortune.

Shankar and his family are still waiting for their luck to change. They do not even have a washbasin. He and his sons wash up in front of the door every morning, while his wife and daughters somehow bathe inside. Water only flows between 3:00 and 6:00 a.m., so that's when all the neighbors quickly fill up buckets and pots.

When Shankar moved to Delhi from the province of Uttar Pradesh 32 years ago, he dreamed of a better life. He hasn't been back to his home village for seven years now because he can't afford to travel there. Shankar earns 8,000 rupees a month, or the equivalent of €110. He pays 2,000 rupees a month in rent, and lives off the rest.

He can't even honor the Hindu gods with a modest display of fireworks at Diwali, the Hindu festival of lights. Instead, he gazes in amazement at Panchsheel Park, where well-heeled Indians stage increasingly extravagant firework displays year after year.

Shankar says he longs to see his relatives back in his village. And while he talks about the mustard fields, which are currently blooming with yellow flowers, the reporter strikes upon the idea of accompanying him to his village, at SPIEGEL's expense.

But first Shankar's boss has to be convinced to give him one or two days off. He agrees, but only under one condition: Shankar will only be allowed to travel by train, and in the cheapest class, not by plane. He says that his employee should not be allowed to get used to a life of luxury.

The intention here is to avoid blurring the differences between poor and rich. Shankar's family belongs to the lowest caste of farmers and, to make matters worse, he comes from Nepal, giving him an even lower status in Indian society.

A Journey Back in Time

Uttar Pradesh is one of the poorest states in India, and people here are particularly trapped in their traditional dependency on large landowners. The fragmentation of Indian society into castes and religions thwarts modernization -- and it prevents India's poor from jointly rising up against the rich.

Driving through Lucknow, the capital of Uttar Pradesh, Shankar marvels at the monumental structures that were built by the former state governor, a woman named Mayawati. She governed here for nearly two decades before resigning in 2012. Mayawati belongs to the caste of the "untouchables," and she is an example of how populist politicians woo the poor -- and disappoint them over and over. Elephants carved in stone, the symbol of Mayawati's centrist Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), stand guard at the gate of a gigantic new park. A few blocks down the street, there is a statue of Mayawati herself.

It's roughly a four-hour drive on the highway from Lucknow to Rautpar, Shankar's village near the city of Gorakhpur. There are straw huts and roadside food stalls on both sides of the highway. The only signs of India's high-tech ambitions here are the ubiquitous mobile phone masts that dot the wheat fields. Over 800 million Indians use mobile phones, yet more than half the population has no access to sanitary toilets. That corresponds to conditions in the Central African Republic.

Shankar has to travel the last few hundred meters to his village on foot. A path between fields leads to huts made of tiles and clay. A crowd of neighbors gathers around him. They see him as the rich uncle from Delhi.

It's like a return to the Middle Ages, as nearly everything here is made of clay: the floor, the walls and the hearth where his sister-in-law cooks outdoors. Mahatma Gandhi would have approved. After all, it was in India's villages that the legendary freedom fighter sought a national identity. But his agrarian romanticism still continues to put the brakes on industrialization.

Shankar unpacks used clothing from his travel bag and, with a smile on his face, distributes it among his relatives. For just one moment, he is standing at the center of attention. Most of the young men here would like to follow his example and move away. However, unlike China, India has too few factories with low-paid jobs for the rural masses.

Not Poor Enough for Help

Indeed, it is the relatively well-educated who primarily benefit from the Indian economic miracle: IT engineers and college graduates who speak fluent English and work in call centers.

Out in the countryside, though, the only hope is the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA). This 2005 law guarantees every adult in the country 100 hours of paid work every year. Under NREGA, the government currently pays the country's poor over \$7 billion to improve roads and build bridges. That's better than begging.

Furthermore, India helps its poor with food rations and other subsidies. But the aid often doesn't reach those in need. In a bid to cut out corrupt middlemen, the government has been making money transfers since January. It now directly pays scholarships and pensions to the accounts of some 245,000 needy individuals in 20 districts.

But what the governing Indian National Congress party praises as a "pioneering reform" is criticized by the opposition as a political trick to buy votes in the run-up to the 2014 parliamentary elections.

In any case, Shankar receives none of this planned bonanza. His salary is too high to benefit from this program, but it's still not enough. In fact, he urgently needs to see a doctor and have a stubborn growth removed from his nose. "It costs roughly 4,000 rupees," he says, "and I don't have that much."

The Limits of Philanthropy

Meanwhile, his rich neighbors in Panchsheel Park come up with increasingly creative ways to spend their money. Dijeet Titus, a top Indian lawyer who represents foreign clients, loves to cruise along the streets of Delhi in his 1957 red Chevrolet Bel Air. In the southern part of the city, where the local moneyed aristocracy likes to spend the weekends at lavish country residences, the 48-year-old is building a museum for his growing collection of vintage cars -- a hangar with over 2,000 square meters (21,500 square feet) of space.

The luxury neighborhood with the so-called farmhouses is located on a dusty road. The wealthy residents use walls and barbed wire to seal themselves off from the misery outside their villas.

"First, I bought a house, then a second one, and then I asked myself: What do I buy now?" Titus is wearing an elegant pair of gold-rimmed glasses as he caresses the shiny grill of a silver Buick 90L from the 1930s.

By collecting such fine vintage cars, he has found a hobby that attracts attention even among the affluent of India. Years ago, Maharajas had themselves chauffeured around in many of these historic vehicles. Soon, the moneyed aristocracy in today's India will gather here under palm trees, enjoy cocktails and admire Titus' cars. He has already collected the appropriate antique furniture and stored it in another section of the huge hangar.

Like Princess Shahnaz, Titus thinks of the poor. He occasionally visits slums to help children there receive a better education. Sometimes he invites them to his home, shows them his antique cars and delights in the wonder in their eyes.

But Titus admits that even he can't change India. "My philanthropy is just a drop in the ocean," he says before walking further and showing off his next vintage car, a 1934 Rolls-Royce 20/25, a particularly impressive example of his exclusive collection.