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From the Editor

India is a land of plenty. It is also a land of plenty of waste. If you suffer Malthusian nightmares of the Great Unfed Billions, think of the food we produce that we don't even consume. We could be buried by an avalanche of fruit (15 per cent of global output) and vegetables (11 per cent) or be drowning in a sea of milk (second-largest producer in the world). But cold storage facilities exist for only about one-tenth of the food and vegetables we produce, and for only about 0.08 per cent of the 90 million tonnes of milk we churn out. Our post-harvest wastage of food is estimated at over Rs 45,000 crore — enough to feed a good-sized European country. Do you wonder that food price inflation touched a high of nearly 13 per cent in July?

We are trapped in a riddle inside an enigma. Our growing per capita incomes fuel rising demand for packaged and processed foods, and if you go to a large supermarket in a big city, the shelves are groaning with thousands of brands. But we will likely buy Chinese apples, not home-grown ones from Kinnaur. Our farmers continue to sell their produce in a hurry and get poor and unprofitable prices because India lacks decent cold storage infrastructure. A farmer in Malda in West Bengal has to transport his mangoes all the

way to southern India to pack-age them, with huge spoilage on the way. An onion farmer near Nashik cannot get a good price because his crop could rot in the rain — the same monsoon that many economists blithely predict will lead to a lowering of food prices.



In early July, the government issued a discussion paper on foreign direct investment in multi-brand retail, opening the door a crack for giant food retailers like Wal-Mart and Carrefour. About time. The Eleventh Five-Year Plan said "modern food retailing... offers the prospect of lower marketing costs and reduced spoilage leading to lower prices for consumers and higher realisation for farmers".

So, here comes India Inc. in shining armour, riding to the drumbeat of huge opportunities. The Planning Commission is rightly wary, though. "(If) front-end investment outpaces the backward linkage with farmers, the immediate outcome may simply be higher imports and lower farm prices," it says.

Our team of writers, photographers and designers has assembled a thought-provoking cover package this fortnight, a cornucopia of conundrums starting on page 34 and bracketed by excellent views from Ashok Gulati (pg 40) and Siddhartha Roy (pg 66). You will find much to absorb, inform and surprise you. And as always, you will also read, and marvel, not just about cabbages, but about betting kings, about master-marketer Maruti, about how skincare makers are cashing in on our Great White Hope, and a lot, lot more.

Chaitanya Kalbag