



COLUMN/CHAITANYA KALBAG



An Agenda for India

"Goodness is something to be chosen. When a man cannot choose he ceases to be a man."

Prison Chaplain in A Clockwork Orange

The ice floes are moving too quickly, and we can only watch the glaciers calve in morbid fascination. The world around us is adrift, and we can spy no safe spot to drop anchor, to draw breath, to take out our gyroscopes and get our bearings.

We no longer speak of double-digit growth, or of being an economic superpower. Two US cents now get you more than one Indian rupee. Industrial output has fallen for the first time in over two years. This year's fiscal deficit promises to be much worse than feared. All around us there is a heaviness of portent. Does this sound unduly pessimistic? Does it have to be so inevitable?

Not really. Even seven per cent growth is better than none, and somewhere in our collective subconscious we have the ability to pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off, and keep going. Twenty years ago, the magic lamp was rubbed and the genie of spirit, enterprise and aspiration let loose. You cannot put it back that easily. When you think of how young India is, and how, eyes shining, it strides towards a happier and richer future, you can shut out the mewling, the

barking, and the braying and start to hear sweet bird-song. As for hope and ambition, take a look at Margaret Bourke-White's photograph of a Sikh refugee family in 1947. How might they have fared in a new India?

I sought counsel from N.R. Narayana Murthy, Chairman Emeritus of Infosys. He had soothing words. This is a rare opportunity for India to achieve its true potential, he said. Thanks to the 1991 reforms, "we have proved that we can accelerate prosperity for a large number of people," he added. "That's what gives me hope – that we can indeed get back to our aspirational growth rate."

All the more reason why the sluggishness of our leaders confounds us. We are a far better informed nation today than we ever were in our history – three-quarters of a billion Indians now have telephone connectivity. When we remember that the vision on which our republic was founded – of the poorest child in the farthest village able to obtain decent education, health care, nutrition and shelter – has been made possible, then there is indeed hope. The same prime minister who appears paralysed today did so much in just a week 20 years ago. It

was easy in the past to sink in the slough of despondency. But we have charted our way in difficult waters before. We just have to put our shoulders to the wheel and agree on an agenda for India. Let's get down to business. ♦



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