

MEGA GAON, GURGAON

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The person standing next to me at the Hutch shop in one of the swank malls could very well have been a newlywed women, fresh off the plane from India, married to that prize catch- an NRI engineer in the Silicon Valley. Come to think of it, the whole atmosphere was as if one was in a suburban Mall in the Valley- the décor, the way the customers were dressed and surprisingly, even the smells. And all this was just a few kilometers away from the dusty, inward looking, small town where I grew up.

I was spending a few days in Gurgaon with my mother. Gurgaon, as in the city of Gurgaon and not the swankiest-address-south-of-Delhi habitation where I found myself. I was born and brought up in the city and had wonderful, nostalgic memories of childhood. This was the age when one spent the better part of the day playing seasonal games in the gullies, and evenings in the neighbour's house watching Doordarshan! The Sunday evening movie and the Wednesday night Chitrahhar were the favourites, though one did not mind watching Krishi Darshan either. The one house which had the television, was also the only one to have a refrigerator and the cold water was heavenly after long afternoons spent playing in the sun! This was the town where everyone knew everything about everyone. Where when a woman drove a scooter, it was the talk of the town! And if that woman happened to wear jeans, it was enough to malign her reputation for ever! The equation was very straightforward- Sleeveless dresses equal loose character!

And here I was, standing next to a women who was dressed as if for a beach in Southern California- shorts, halter top and the wedding bangles! The whole scene looked fairly incongruous! But then this was not Gurgaon, I told myself. Maybe things are different the other side of National Highway 8! And so I took the car and drove around the lanes and bazaars where I had spent my childhood.

The city- it cannot be called a town any more- seems to be going through a phase of schizophrenia. The neighbourhoods where there was no underground sewage, where old women used to sit in the lanes on charpoys, gossiping and the men folk would work odd jobs, now give an impression of new found prosperity. The new generation, thanks to the boom in the economy of the city, seems to have given up the old ways. Houses have been remodeled, Maruti cars and motorcycles are parked in the narrow lanes where once flowed open drains. But the charpoys are still there!

I notice a similar situation on the roads. Apart from the monstrous number of vehicles, what is noteworthy is the number of women driving two wheelers. And they are dressed smartly. The wind blowing from across the National Highway seems to be having its effect. Maybe it is the growing number of youngsters, who are taking up call center jobs. New found independence, the relaxed, westernized atmosphere, access to money and goods. All of this seems to be making an impact.

I go to the grocer from whom we used to buy provisions in the olden days. He does not recognize me but when I introduce myself, he is very welcoming. I sit with him, sipping the mandatory campa cola (all soft drinks are called that!) and observe that his

customers don't seem to have changed much. Of course shoppers have become more brand focused, thanks to the television, but their profile does not seem to have changed.

Of course there are changes- the rickshaw pullers used to be mostly Mewatis whose land was so barren that they had to come to the city to work. Now they are all Biharis. The plumbers were all Biharis till the Oriyas came and undercut them. Why this did not happen with rickshaw pullers puzzles me! The city is much more multicultural now. Previously it was either the refugees or the local people. The refugees mostly lived in refugee colonies of the kind I mentioned above (though some upwardly mobile ones built big houses). Now one finds people from all over the country in the city. The factories and the call centers have taken care of that. The newcomers have not really integrated with the locals and one sees rath yatras, pongal festivals and so on.

The conundrum is getting clearer in my mind- what this city is undergoing is not unique. It might be that the scale is more magnified here because of its status as the new, hot destination south of Delhi. But almost all small and medium sized towns are undergoing a similar transition. How the material transformation is impacting the consciousness is confusing. My mother, a practicing gynecologist who has practiced for over 40 years in the city tells me that the number of educated people opting for pre natal testing is increasing. Halter tops and shorts coexist with increasing sex selection. Is this the urban India of 2006 encapsulated?