

## THE BUSINESS OF RETAIL

“Left opposes FDI in retail”, “Mukesh Ambani eyeing retail boom”, scream the headlines. It seems that “retail” is going to be the next sunshine sector after IT, ITES and biotechnology. Walmart, the much maligned behemoth is supposedly eyeing the great 300 million Indian middle class. The whole shopping experience is going to change with supermarkets and hyper marts.

Shopping has definitely changed over the last few decades. I remember the small town where I grew up- since everyone knew everyone else, the shopkeepers were known to me. This had the advantage that one could buy on credit but also had its problems. If one bought alcohol or cigarettes, one could be sure that by the time one got home, news would have already reached the parents! But the shopkeepers were helpful, courteous and shopping was a pleasant experience. The shopkeeper enquired about one’s family, shared gossip about the town and yet treated you with respect.

And this was not just in the small towns. Going to big shops in Delhi to buy clothes or jewelry was equally pleasant. The shopkeeper would be extremely polite ( to the point of being oily!) and would immediately order “Coca-Cola” for everyone. This was a smart ploy since most people would then be too embarrassed to go out without buying anything! Nevertheless, his manner would be one of being helpful, attentive and yet not aggressive or obnoxious.

This seemed to have changed now- in the upper middle class colony where I live, shopkeepers are brusque, giving one the impression that they are not particularly keen on your business. Instead of being helpful, they are usually dismissive. One favorite ploy if he does not have the particular brand that you are looking for is to confidently declare that the particular product is “no longer being made by the company”! Never mind that you have just seen a new ad for the product on television!

But my recent experience with the new-age shopkeepers has given me a new insight. I had to get a “Teeka’ made for the festival of “Bhai-Dooj”. I went to a shop and bought some vermilion and then innocently asked for 2-3 grains of rice to put into it. Imagine my surprise when the shopkeeper turned around and told me that he cannot give me 3 grains of rice unless I pay for it! I was amazed, angry and aghast. I took out 10 rupees and asked him piquantly to give me 3 grains of rice at which he replied that he would give me rice worth 10 rupees!

The other customers at the shop were in sympathy with my plight as I mumbled about what the world has come to. One person offered a mythological perspective and told the story of how Draupadi had fed Lord Krishna 2 grains of rice and managed to satiate him while others talked about how the country had changed. But the best retort came from a smart aleck buying bread. He said that I had made a mistake by honestly asking for 3 grains of rice for a “Teeka”. I should have asked for a “sample” of the rice being sold and the shopkeeper would have happily given me a handful! Retail revolution anyone?