

My Early Years in Delhi

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For someone from Kolkata who had boarded the ‘Deluxe’ train from an overwhelmingly large and frighteningly busy Howrah station, the railway station of New Delhi appeared to be very small and so quite provincial. This was during the biting winter of 1967. I had been told by panicky relatives back home to wrap my muffler tightly around my neck and over my ears. I had complied with this instruction until our taxi stopped before a group of smartly turned out in bright school blazers greeted us with unstoppable giggles. Father Noel D’Souza of Saint Xavier’s Collegiate School, Calcutta, who chaperoned me to ‘The International Conference of High School Students’ was too busy paying the taxi fare to notice. We had reached Springdales School, the venue of our conference and the place was teeming with delegates from all over India. Father Noel was, anyway, a man of God, but I was under no such obligation to the Almighty. Hence the girlish giggles had their immediate effect. I ruffled my nerdish hair to appear a bit more casual and unwrapped the unstylish muffler, which I slung loosely and rakishly over the shoulders — even as the cold got straight to my very vulnerable Bengali throat.

To a Calcuttan, the Delhi of 1967 appeared to have just too much space and its public areas were far more sprawling and better maintained than Kolkata. But it also seemed somewhat bleak, lonely and not warm enough to be endearing. The cars we accosted were Fiats and Standard Heralds, and some honking Ambassadors, as in dear, congested Kolkata. But since traffic was less congested, the roads appeared conspicuously wider and emptier. Yes, however unbelievable, that was Delhi in 1967 — except for areas in the old town, Karol Bagh and CP. What bugged me is why one had to walk miles along deserted roads to locate a teashop or *paan*-cigarette shop. We, from delightfully disorganised cities, were not hooked on tea, smoke or *paans* — we missed the hustle and bustle of ‘real life’ of unplanned growth. These shops exuded life, attracted chatty customers and blared Hindi filmy songs over Vividh Bharati. Scooters and cycles were more numerous and my first trip on a spluttering auto-rickshaw in Delhi taught me that these bone-rattlers specialised in taking outstation passengers “for a ride” in every sense— as they went round and round in circles. I was compelled to learn two new Punjabi words from the drivers — they were *Khabbe* for left and *Sajje* for right turns, as no one seemed to understand the Hindi equivalents in Delhi then. One hardly hears them now.

After this foray, I visited Delhi quite a few times, and saw it grow, literally, in front of my eyes — through the UNCTAD meet of 1968, the Asiad of 1982 (how could one miss it?), the massive 7th NAM summit of 1983 and so on. I was very much in Delhi when truck-loads of money were poured in to build India's fastest and most extravagant Metro Rail network. I envied Delhi's Metro for boring underground tunnels without ripping the city's entails apart, while Kolkata's Metro slaughtered the cramped city's main over-ground thoroughfares for a decade, the best years of my youth. But thank God, for Delhi's superior and bigger metro network— or else, by now, both traffic and commuting would have collapsed — as the city just expanded and bloated beyond imagination. Later, the Commonwealth Games of 2010 added a lot to Delhi and over a hundred flyovers have come up by now, where there were hardly any when I came for the first time. There are now some 35 five star hotels, up from the number one could count on one's fingers in 1980. The DND Bridge and Barapulla have improved life so much. It is impossible to explain this to anyone at all — except to some old timers — what phenomenal growth that has taken place between that chilly morning of 1967 and the autumn afternoon of autumn 2024 — when I left Delhi for good, Inshallah.

I had lived as a denizen of Delhi that I proudly called my second home for nearly two decades, in three phases, and have now returned to Kolkata. The latter looks so pitifully behind the times and surely lacks the pulsating growth of other metropolises and their dazzling prosperity. But, it still nurses a throbbing, warm heart. In fact, I think I am the only 'Kolkata Bengali of West Bengal cadre' who has spent the longest period of twenty years in Delhi. This was by deliberate choice, as was my return to Kolkata. I am not comparing my years spent with the much smarter Delhi-born Bengalis or the always-ahead and *Prabashi* Bengalis from other parts of India, who clung on to Delhi for dear life. But the 'locals' of West Bengal are usually apprehensive of venturing to Delhi as they view it as cold, calculating city and a rather difficult place to work in or adjust to. The nation's capital and its slick bureaucrats, its no-holds-barred politicians and the jet-set businessmen 'who must get their deals done' (never mind the cost and consequences) give them a distinct sense of unease and trepidation. So much so, that most 'local Bengalis' and (surprisingly) even most of IAS and IPS officers who were assigned to the West Bengal cadre from other states do not also usually work in Delhi. West Bengal is not known to be highly pressured or competitive and is/was quite comfortable to work in, so few apply for Central deputations. It is somewhat quite laid back in many respects, which suits a particular class to stay put in Kolkata. In any case, Kolkata is still among the top 6 metropolises of India — though both the Centre and the State are trying quite hard to make it push it out of this list.

Along with this personal reluctance of IAS and IPS officers to work in Delhi, there is a second reason and this is the most unjustified reluctance of the State government in not forwarding their applications to work at the Centre. The third and the most unfair obstacle is that the State does not release them for a central posting, even when they are selected, through a highly competitive process. This cruelty has been the prevailing administrative culture in many States (especially Gujarat before 2014) and now West Bengal leads in this pettiness.

I had my first taste of this when I approached the State government, in my tenth year of my service, to be permitted to move to Delhi on deputation. I had no idea that my illustrious Bengali batchmate had met the Chief Secretary before me to plead that he be allowed to go to Delhi as deputy secretary as his family and roots were in Delhi — which was true. The very business-like Chief Secretary dismissed me even before I could explain why a ‘local Bengali’ needed to work in Delhi. He told me clearly that since I had no aged parents (has anyone heard of ‘young parents?’) who were pining to see me in Delhi, I should give up the idea of working in Delhi. And, he mentioned in passing as an old Delhi-hand, that it was, indeed, a ‘challenging place’. I learnt from him the art of diplomatic rejection.

I went back, quite dejected, to Bardhaman, where I was then District Magistrate of the-then undivided and impossible-to-manage district. My wife consoled me and I learnt to live with rejection. But, within a few months, my luck took a dramatic turn. Mr. PR Das Muni, the new President of the State Congress, whom I had accosted not too pleasantly a couple of times when I ‘controlled’ his agitations against the Left government of the State as law and order problems. He was appointed by Rajiv Gandhi as the Union Minister of State for Commerce. And, lo and behold, he chose me (though I hardly knew him) as his Private Secretary. I felt that this was a chance I should not miss — whatever be the political fallout. I seized it, and despite a lot of objections and hurdles, managed to land in Delhi on the 30th of November 1986 — even without any formal letter of appointment. My batchmate (who had beaten me at the game) welcomed me warmly with a good dinner and then took me out for a drive to India Gate for ice cream. My teeth were chattering, as it was some 5 degrees Celsius — on the 3rd of December; the date and temperature remain embedded in my mind. The green lights of ice cream carts and the frozen delights, taken out of their iceboxes, are still synonymous with pleasure. There was a chilly wind which only added to the pleasure. A bit of Kolkata left me that very night — as I learnt to brave Delhi.

I settled in soon enough despite the usual nagging **man-made (?)** and learnt to navigate the strange ways of the nation’s capital. The first shock I received was when I asked a passerby for directions and was rudely snubbed, taunting: “Do I look like a bloody guide to you?” In Kolkata, there would be half a dozen people volunteering information — many would be wrong, even as they tried to be helpful. And, here I was, in such a rude place. I learnt, soon enough from my burly Jat driver a very crude but essential cultural norm of Delhi. He told me, quite wryly, that unlike other places where people fold their hands in a *namaste* to greet each other, many people in Delhi actually move towards you with one hand downwards and the other upward. If the lower arm can catch your feet, they will get their work done that way, but if the upper arm catches your throat, they will throttle you until their job is done. Very raw, indeed, but so true. Aggressiveness has to be met with belligerence, as good manners are often mistaken for cowardice. But the good will always be good everywhere, and a helpful gesture is remembered, even in Delhi.

The Minister's office in Udyog Bhavan was a mad collection of officials from different departments and agencies — who were badgered, begged, borrowed or stolen from. Each one had his or her own reason for jumping on to the bandwagon — some knew the minister when he was not even an MP, others had been recommended by his uncle in Chittaranjan Park for reasons that I never fathomed, but most joined as they wanted a better government flat or school admission for their kids, both out of turn under the 'Minister's Quota'. The regular and hierarchical bureaucracy of the ministry looked upon the MoS with suspicion (he was a politician) and he was not their real boss — the cabinet minister was the one who mattered. They viewed the PS with even greater suspicion — "Is he really powerful or just some picked-up flunky?" Another question was "Is he still one of us or has he turned into a slimy political type?" One of the most powerful Joint Secretaries (JSs), Mr Jiten Renjen, who was in charge of the establishment, asked me quite bluntly how on earth I had landed the most coveted Udyog Bhavan post. Was it 'caste' (outside Bengal, it matters a lot) or was it 'cadre' (some State Cadres like his Uttar Pradesh invariably pushed their acolytes to the best posts) or was it all because of my 'politics'? I remember replying that "I was an unknown Bong from a peripheral state and an inconsequential or unhelpful cadre. God has been kind to me". He guffawed and became very friendly from that day onward, calling me over occasionally for drinks — a kindness that I will never forget.

Mr. Das Munsii was more than tactful and, as a politician, he could disguise his disgust with pleasantries — a quality that I could not pick up during my recent abortive foray into politics. He realised he was a novice as a minister and was, therefore, generally helpful to all, as he needed their assistance. The initial disdain of the bureaucracy for the new MoS died down. His English was not the best and soon enough, I had senior officers dropping in, after coming out of his room, asking me to make sense of what they had just been told by the MoS. The minister was, however, a complete political creature, who made it clear to me that he could spend just an hour or so for official work — since he was busy for the remaining 10 to 15 or so hours in talking to party people, to visitors from his constituency. or to the press. The latter, incidentally, was his forte and he would be chatting, gossiping, speculating and leaking information till late in the evening. I deliberately avoided these 'meetings', as I had to plough through fat files with perfectly-complicated government language notings of the Central bureaucracy, without any guidance. Besides, I had to be really careful so that some crafty or dodgy ministry officer could not pull a fast one on us.

It was the height of the notorious Permit-Control Raj in India and Commerce and other 'economic ministries' of Udyog Bhavan were known to be 'user-friendly' to business interests — many of which were certainly not above board. In fact, it was my minister who gave me a long talk on this and told me to watch out, and study the file notes and proposals very carefully. The senior minister was reputed to be 'deep into deals' and very conscious that he was the boss — as it happens invariably between a Cabinet Minister and his Minister of State (MoS). My young minister was determined not to acquire such an unwholesome reputation as he had a long way to go. We heard horror stories of how a past Commerce minister's Additional PS had been quite an operator and a

fixer, a distinction that he has carried on all his life, switching parties and loyalties, even till now. The well-meaning PS of that Minister was from my cadre and a clean soul, so he just looked the other way. I soon learnt to be more than doubly careful about proposals and files from some specific JSs (Joint Secretaries) who were into mischief. Most were, however, above board, but some were just malleable enough to permit someone who was politically or economically powerful (and useful) to make his pile, but would guard their own interest. It was difficult to fix anything on a single officer as all decisions were taken through committees and (theoretically) everyone present had agreed to it. One had to pore over reams of paper to locate past decisions and then point out contradictions and seek explanations — before telling the minister to go ahead and sign.

I learnt to get along with the infamous ‘Permit Control Raj’, when everything was tightly controlled by government and much of it was quite rotten. Controls were all justified by well-intentioned and high-sounding reasons, and the rules and orders were so full of checks and terribly suspicious of business and businessmen. One discovered how whole breeds of specialists thrived, within the bureaucracy and outside (the go-betweens), who could ensure that those who paid well could get anything, despite the controls. In fact, the tighter the regulation, the higher was the ‘fee’ for finding a plausible way of negotiating through the labyrinth. I remember how the main public entrances to Udyog Bhavan were jammed before Diwali by representatives from different companies carrying (quite openly) gifts like silk saris, suit lengths of fine cloth materials and other gifts for many ranks of officers. Mr. Das Munsi made a strict rule and I directed every official in the minister’s office not accept any expensive gifts, other than a simple box of sweets or dry fruits. This did not make me popular among the staff who complained that these gifts were a pittance and that the ‘real ones’ were handed over at the residences of other officers and staff.

The fact that the Congress had secured a record number of Lok Sabha seats in the 1984 elections meant that too many factions appeared and fought battles, covert or overt, against each other. Mr. Pranab Mukherjee had been sidelined by the new regime, and Mr. ABA Ghani Khan Chaudhary was very close to the PM, while Mr. Ashok Kumar Sen was considered indispensable as Law Minister and old strategist. Mr. Ajit Panja was definitely flamboyant but no match for junior ministers like Mr. Das Munsi or Mr. Santosh Mohan Deb, a Bengali minister from the northeast. And then, there was a Deputy Minister, the lowest in the pecking order, Mr. P Chidambaram who was destined from ‘day one’ to go miles and miles. A spunky young lady MP who kept dropping in to see the Minister and was usually made to wait in my room for long periods was Ms. Mamata Banerjee. She was liked by the PM and therefore disliked by all other senior and junior ministers. She was more than courteous and would chat for hours, asking questions on how the bureaucracy of Delhi functioned. I remember how both Mr. Das Munsi and she used to travel together in the PM’s plane to Kolkata and other places, and how I had to sit next to her on one occasion when I was told to be part of the entourage. We talked and talked for the entire flight period. She was quite a firebrand, but this is not the place to elucidate upon her story.

Many of minister's political friends and juniors complained that I was 'uncooperative' when they asked me for certain favours. I was told by Tapan Roy, the more politically savvy Additional PS to our minister, that several political persons used to get multiple open air tickets (and hotel charges) from different favour-seekers in Kolkata and elsewhere to travel to Delhi and reach their complaints or pleas or 'deals' to the minister himself. They then pocketed the proceeds of air ticket refunds and multiple hotel charges. One even carried a lady friend to Delhi, but I could not find out whether she stayed in the same room or the next. To keep his flock together, the minister had no option but to sign vague letters to other ministers, requesting them 'to look into these requests'. I discovered soon enough that in Delhi such letters were usually chucked into the waste paper basket unless the minister rang up his counterpart with a special plea. The duped 'beneficiaries' and the middlemen politicians, however, flaunted the minister's letters around and treasured these. Obviously, I refused to oblige this category and these party colleagues of the minister were quite annoyed with me. I must compliment the minister for standing by me and consoling me when senior leaders of his party had 'tiffs' with me.

After a year and a half, I had had enough of all this and felt that it was better for me to relinquish the PS's post with all its perks and ask for a simple post of one of the two dozen Deputy Secretary (DSs) in the ministry. The minister was reluctant to let me go, but I located a Bengal cadre Tamil officer who was looking for an out-of-turn flat and a bit tired of being just one more Deputy Secretary. Since Ramu had an honest reputation and spoke Bengali rather well, the minister finally agreed to let me go. The Commerce Ministry had a vacancy and the Department of Personnel agreed to accommodate me — even though I had technically not come 'on offer'. The political scene was hotting up as Mr. VP Singh had resigned from Mr. Rajiv Gandhi's Cabinet over the 'Bofors' issue and the BJP was busy stoking the Ayodhya Ram Janambhoomi issue. Every day in Parliament was full of commotion and slogan-shouting against the government, but this was the atmosphere in which Mr. Das Munsii thrived for he could confabulate with all parties and work out solutions.

By the end of 1988, I moved to a small office room in the Ministry that was right above the minister's and the understanding was that whenever he wanted or needed my 'advice', I would have to drop all work and rush to him. My window opened out to the Boat Club lawns that were then the perfect Hyde Park for agitators of all types. I distinctly remember Mahendra Singh Tikait's massive rally of farmers in 1988 that ran into lakhs. We used to rush to the window to see the 'fun' of police clashing with agitators, every time there was a loud uproar. History was being played out outside, but I was more engrossed in tackling mundane problems that the unsettling shift from a PS to a DS entailed. No one was there to attend to my essential needs and the same guards who used to salute me whenever I got out of the car as PS now told me to park my self-driven ordinary Fiat car far away. I finally found a small tree (more of a thinnish plant) under

whose skeletal branches, I could park my car. It used to be hot like a pressure cooker every time I opened the door in the evening, and there no air conditioning in ordinary cars then.

By the way, the scooters of Delhi were giving way to tiny Maruti 800 cars and Delhi was full of them during the 1986 to 1989 period. Many of them flaunted sayings like “Chunnu tey Munnu de Papa tey Mummy di Gaddi” (Chunnu’s and Munnu’s dad and mum’s car). So drastically has the picture changed, and in the last few years in Delhi (in the early part of the 2020s) that Chunnu and Munnu now have their own big cars and mum and dad have two each. I used to wonder how so much wealth has exploded in Delhi in these 30-35 years — that every person worth something is seen driving around in Mercedes, BMWs, Audis, Jaguars, and Lexuses. The uber rich, of course, sported Rolls-Royces or Lamborghinis or Ferraris. And the better-off middle class are in Toyotas (not Innova but Fortuner), high-end Kias and Hondas/Hyundais. Obviously, much of this wealth is ill-gotten. But within a decade or two after the historic Liberalisation of the Indian economy of 1991. It surely released a volcano of pent up economic energies and spread wealth all across the upper and better-off middle classes. Their size increased phenomenally, as did their needs and greed — which they indulged in. even as they trampled down on everyone else.

Getting back to 1988, it was amusing and annoying that the same ‘administration chaps’ of the Commerce Ministry who would run to attend to a faulty light or fan when I was PS would often not even take my calls as DS. But life became more real. I drove my wife and small son to Sarojini Nagar market and did the weekly shopping, haggling all the time, that no District Magistrate ever does. Policemen would pull me up for the slightest fault in parking or taking a wrong turn at the traffic signal. After all, they knew that Delhi has more IAS or similar officers than stray monkeys, and the latter commanded more fear or respect. I learnt to carry heavy shopping bags as Nandita bargained in perfect street-Hindi that she had picked up from the maids, while my tiny little son ran around wherever he wanted, giving me endless worries but reappeared with a big grin, just before I thought my heart would surely attack.

I wish the West Bengal cadre of the IAS and the IPS was more cohesive or helpful, especially to a raw newcomer like me. I found better mentors in the Joint Secretaries in the Commerce Ministry, like Mr. DP Bagchi of the Odisha cadre or Mr. JS Gill of the Punjab cadre or even the very resourceful Mr. JN Renjen, whom I have mentioned. My cadre had the reputation of giving miserly ‘assessment reports’ of officers’ performance which ensured that very few could make the grade at the Centre. I remember (the late, lamented) Mr. Ashok Chatterjee, who was JS in Defence Ministry who was really caring and helpful to juniors in crises. The two or three secretaries in the Central government who were from the West Bengal cadre were up on Mount Olympus where we were concerned — very distant figures. I found more warmth in secretaries from other cadres like Mr. Shiromani Sharma and HK Dar than my own. But the meet-

ings of the Presidency College Alumni were a delight and our seniors in the bureaucracy of other cadres more than compensated for the indifference of others that rankled us.

And this was the when West Bengal still had some fairly respectable representation in the Central Secretariat. We had heard of the legendary Rays in North and South Block — AK, KK, HN and so on. I met one of them, Mr. HN Ray, who had retired as Finance Secretary and then did a stint at the World Bank. They had a lovely, cozy house in Friends Colony and it was a delight to drop in. He was so modest and gentlemanly that every time we visited him, my wife would lecture me nonstop on the way home how I should learn to be like him. I could never learn to be so polite. That reminds me of how droves of good students of Presidency and other top colleges of Kolkata had got through the IAS in the 1950s and 1960s. Every batch had quite a few from Kolkata but it was the Naxalite period of 1967-1973 (much of which coincided with my college and university years) that this tradition was shattered for ever. Bengalis from Bengal hardly ever make it to the IAS — in IPS, the number is slightly better. The few Bengalis who enter the IAS each year are invariably from Delhi or *Prabashis* of other states.

Coming back to the Permit Control Raj, I have some amusing recollections. One was when a file was placed for my approval which said that we should permit an amount of something like 1,37, 843 peacock tail feathers this year. When I asked why this number, I was informed by the desk officer that this number was 2.333 percent higher than last year. But why was last year's permit fixed at that level? The prompt answer was that it was 2.333 percentage higher than the previous year. I kept the file back and studied its notes for several previous years and found that the percentage rise each year was constant, but no one could explain the basis of the figures. I demanded that the real reason for this routinised decision be found out. The section officers and desk officers threw their hands up in exasperation. "Because it is always like this" did not appear to be a compelling logic to me. Within a day or two, a delegation of exporters of peacock-tail feathers met me to complain that my (stupid) questions were hurting their business interests as they had procured the exact number of feathers, packed them up and sent them to the ports because they were certain that these permits would be issued, as it had happened every year. Besides, importers in the Middle East, where these feathers were in high value and used to sweep the 'sacred area' of mosques, were getting impatient.

But they had no reply to my persistent question as to why we should permit this number and not say, double of it, or even half the number. Nobody knew. Finally, a wizened old man mentioned that he had been told that, in the past, some unscrupulous people used to pluck feathers off live birds. The Government requested the famous, ornithologist, Dr. Salim Ali to study the issue and give his opinion. He had declared that X number of feathers were naturally shed by peacocks each year. Based on this magic number way back in that obscure year, a certain percentage of it was "deemed fit for export" without harming the birds. And then, it was determined by wise men that every year thereafter the export quota could be increased by 2.333 percentage of the previous

year — as it was a calculated percentage of that percentage by which the number of peacocks increased annually. Whew! No one could show me that file and then the Secretary and the Additional Secretary intervened and told me not to quibble, because exporters were troubling them through MPs and ministers. I guessed I had no option but to approve the file — which I did. I gave one small note while returning the file, saying “I sincerely hope that peacocks of India knew that they were obliged to shed that number of feathers each year, in terms of the Commerce Ministry’s diktats.”

But not everyone was living off the benefits of the past. My rather hyperactive JS, Mr. MR Sivaraman called me to his room to introduce me to the exporters of oil-seed cakes and extractions. They exported the leftovers ‘cakes’ after oil had been extracted and their materials constituted low value but high volume cargo. Thus, they could not afford to ship them from the bigger ports, and instead went through smaller and cheaper ports. Abroad, animal feed producers mixed these de-oiled cakes with maize and a few other things to make first class feed for poultry and animals. Fair enough, but the problem lay in transporting these extractions in huge loads from central and western states to the numerous small ports of Gujarat, as there were bottlenecks — like the lack of connectivity by road or rail from the main routes right up to the small ports. So off to Gujarat I was sent by the JS — in blazing 42 degrees celsius heat -- and I literally hopped from port to port, from Kandla to almost Bharuch, trying to solve problem after problem or referring them to Delhi or Gandhinagar for immediate top-level intervention. I came back totally sunburned— my wife screamed when she saw me after a week. But when the export of these products almost doubled in a year, it gave me immense satisfaction. That is what the Central government in Delhi is supposed to do, not destabilise states or make life miserable for the Opposition-ruled ones. The exporters who reached our ministry in auto rickshaws in 1989 now travel in swank luxury cars.

A sight to behold during the 1980s was the central spinal corridor on the first floor of Udyog Bhavan. It flaunted daunting ‘red lights’ outside every chamber of the Joint Secretaries and Additional Secretaries almost all the time, so much so, that we renamed it as ‘the Red Light area’. These red and green lamps outside every chamber were to indicate whether the official was busy or free to meet any of the dozens and scores of visitors (businessmen, middlemen and favour seekers). The lights were invariably red and the PS to the JS or the AS looked harassed or officious as they fobbed off those who were not ‘nice enough to them’ or the ‘boss was unwilling to meet’. We Deputy Secretaries and Directors (oh, I was promoted as Director, soon enough — by the Newtonian laws of motion) often had to wait in the ‘outer office’ of the boss that were often just cubbyholes. Standing there were businessmen, both bright and shady, who were in the queue. It is not that all JSs were looking for favours — a few did, indeed — or that they were too pompous. It was just that, over the years, rules and controls and prohibitions had piled on each other and everyone wanted to play safe, lest some provision be violated and then the ‘three dreaded Cs’ (CAG, the dreaded chief government accountant, the CBI or the more-dreaded Central Bureau of Investigation or the CVC, the Central Vigilance Commission) pounced on them. That notwithstanding, one found both the indicator-lights were switched off for an hour or more, as many

a JS was off to lunch with some favour seeker. They understood his problems better over 5-star cuisine and imported vodka that did not reveal his sense of cheer through his breath, once back in office.

As for me, I carried a tiffin box from home and was told by my PA that this sight put off many a petitioner who had hoped to get me over to Taj Hotel on Mansingh Road for lunch. It was not that I hated 5-star food (I couldn't afford it), but that the lunch hour was the best time one could work, without interruptions and visitors. Of course, I joined the 'Directors' lunch club' in someone's room at times. There, we simply warmed our home-cooked food over some heater and shared stuff, as we made mincemeat of our bosses. I remember how Ashish walked in late quite angry and asked us all to guess the height of his shorty boss. When we agreed that he was 5 feet 3 inches, Ashish said "Hah! That's what you see above the ground. He's 10 feet 6 and half of him is underneath the corridor!". Bosses were the butt end of our jokes — just a common practice the world over. I left the ministry in December 1991 after spending six busy and satisfying months in tearing down the Berlin Wall of the Licence Permit Control Raj during the Liberalisation operation that began in June 1991. I mention this here because when I visited Udyog Bhavan as a 'State secretary' a couple of years later, the 'red light area' was dazzling with green lights and looked so bleakly empty. With licences and controls gone, the spinal corridor had none of the crowds of favour seekers and touts. I dropped into a batchmate's room — he had become JS — and we had a big laugh that even green lights would not do. Udyog Bhavan now needed blinking green lights to get crowds back to good ole days.

Things changed over the next few years and though Liberalisation brought in huge benefits, the scale of corruption went up a lot as well. The sleaze moved more and more upward to the political class that was finally ruling, some half a century after Independence. Ministers now started changing bureaucrats like used tissue paper and there were enough babus who wore their user-friendly signs all over their selves. I shall narrate this part of the story some other time and recall my experience with the new confident entrepreneurial class that had replaced the supplicants of the 1980s. I was back in Delhi from 2006 to 2016, and again from 2021 to 2024 — but this is not the place to discuss those phases. The new entrepreneurial class did produce wealth and could buy up everyone and everything. Those who has the blessings of hand-in-glove politicians, later during the unabashed crony capitalism period, could not only buy. They and their political colluders could also sell off a lot —including much of what is known as our India.