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Modernization of India leaves most of its people behind

By Kumar Venkat

BANGALORE, India - I look out the window and watch construction workers building a house. Barefoot workers are standing ankle-deep in freshly poured concrete, spreading it with pieces of wood. The next day, as I enter a restaurant for dinner, I see workers renovating the lobby, using power saws with no protection for their hands or eyes. Upper-class households employ maids to do most of the cleaning and washing. Drivers drive the well-to-do to offices and stores, and spend a lot of time waiting as their employers go about their business.

In Bangalore, as in many other large Indian cities, times are good for those who have returned home with money after living and working abroad, and for those who run businesses or work for technology companies. But they represent a small sliver of the population here. The software and business process outsourcing industries altogether employ less than a million workers in a country of more than a billion people.

What India offers to the upper classes is low-cost labor for everything from construction to household help. The minority with the money can literally live in a bubble of luxurious homes and cars, fancy stores and restaurants, and offices where business is global and technology is king. The bubble is held aloft by the huge surplus of labor at the bottom of the pyramid.

But step outside the bubble and reality strikes you in the face. Roads are impossibly crowded and the air is thick with exhaust from all the vehicles. Pedestrians intermingle with traffic in a chaotic dance where bigger vehicles generally get the right of way. Buses are jam-packed with office workers and students who can't afford private transportation. Street corners, even in expensive neighborhoods, often serve as holding areas for trash. Bangalore seems to be bursting at the seams.

Those fortunate to live in the bubble benefit from labor costs in yet another way. Their education and skills, offered at a lower cost than Western workers, ensure that multinational technology companies create many more jobs here than in their home countries, which in turn helps sustain life in the bubble.

India's march toward modernity now proceeds on a new multilane highway connecting its four largest cities. Modeled on highways in the West, the Golden Quadrilateral allows high-speed driving that has been impossible in the past. But most Indians will never drive on this symbol of an emerging automobile-based society. About one-third of Indians earn less per day than the toll charged to access this highway. The toll of \$1.33, however, is not the biggest obstacle since the vast majority of Indians can't buy a car even with a lifetime of earnings.

The Golden Quadrilateral, and other national highways under construction, may be needed to prop up India's frayed infrastructure. But the tens of billions of dollars being poured into these highways haven't been matched by a similar investment to build up a modern public transport network that the average person can rely upon. The lives of those who can drive on these highways, or fly on one of the many private airlines, are far different from the rest of the population.

The lack of infrastructure, regularly lamented by local newspapers and business leaders, has been caused in part by the lifestyles of the affluent. Roads are carrying large volumes of traffic -- much of it private vehicles -- which they weren't designed for. In response, Bangalore is planning as many as 15 new "flyovers" -- multilane overhead roads that can bypass local streets -- which would further separate the haves and the have-nots. While India is now proud of producing a million automobiles a year, there is amazingly little talk of public transport for the hundreds of millions who may never set foot inside a car.

In its race to modernize and catch up with China, India seems to be lifting the uppermost layers of its society to nearly Western standards of living, leaving behind a great social divide that may be difficult to heal. The alternative -- development that fits the available resources and touches much more of the population -- is clearly not on India's agenda at the moment.

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