### PERESTROIKA AND INDIA – THE GLOBAL PROCESS

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"Free Enterprise was born with man and shall survive as long as man survives."

> - A. D. Shroff 1899-1965 Founder-President Forum of Free Enterprise

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### By .

VIREN J. SHAH\*

"We are never completely contemporaneous with our present. History advances in disguise; it appears on stage wearing the mask of the preceding scene, and we tend to lose the meaning of the play. Each time the curtain rises, continuity has to be re-established. The blame is, of course, not history's, but lies in our vision, encumbered with memories and images learned in the past. We see the past superimposed on the present, even when the present is a revolution."

Regis Debray: 'Revolution in the Revolution? (Grove Press, Inc., New York, 1967)

And so it is with 'Perestroika' in the USSR. Debray was writing on the significance of Cuba for the rest of Latin America but his observation is valid in other contexts as well.

#### Perestroika : Meaning and content

A basic point first. Gorbachev has pointed out :

"We are looking within socialism, rather than outside

<sup>\*</sup> The author is Chairman and Managing Director of Mukand Iron and Steel Works Ltd. The text is based on the statement made by him at the Company's Annual General Meeting.

it, for the answers to all the questions that arise. We assess our successes and errors alike by socialist standards."

This declaration, of fundamental importance though it is, should not blind us to the radical nature of the change being attempted and to the large elements of historical discontinuity in the process involved. Gorbachev has given a broad, if somewhat racy, account of the restructuring now-under way in his book.

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'PERESTROIKA, New Thinking for our Country and the World'. \*\*The book, like the classics, is in the danger of being cited more often than read. I shall not paraphrase but quote from it directly at some length in order to give the reader a feel of both the substance and the tenor of the new thinking. The reader, if he perseveres through the many excerpts, will see in them much that is relevant to our own condition.

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"Perestroika is a word with many meanings. But if we are to choose from its many possible synonyms the key one which expresses its essence most accurately, then we can say thus : perestroika is a revolution.. (It) involves radical changes on the way to a qualitatively new state.: When we call our measures revolutionary, we mean that they are far-reaching, radical and uncompromising, and affect the whole of

 Harper & Row Publishers, New York, 1987. All quotations except where specified otherwise, are from this book.

society from top to bottom. They affect all spheres of life and do so in a comprehensive way. This is not putting new paint on our society or dressing up its sores, but involves its complete recovery and renewal. Politics is undoubtedly the most important thing in any revolutionary process. This is equally true of perestroika. Therefore we attach priority to political measures, broad and genuine democratization, the resolute struggle against red tape and violations of laws, and the active involvement of the masses in managing the country's affairs. All this is directly linked with the main question of any revolution, the question of power. .. there's a growing understanding, both within the Party and in society as a whole, that we have started an unprecedented political, economic, social and ideological endeavor."

'Perestroika' is not a series of isolated responses to sectoral crises. The reforms it embodies have an overall coherence and integrity as well as an underlying unity of vision. Perestroika is remarkable for its sweep. It leaves nothing untouched. It is conceived in the explicit recognition of the vital and manifold interconnections in society, in the awareness that is to say, that basic changes in one domain cannot be effective without requisite or consequential changes in others. In short, perestroika is inspired by a world-view.

Here's Gorbachev on the role of the courts :

On the role of the courts :

"It is especially important to enhance the role of courts.. to guarantee the independence of judges,

and to observe most strictly democratic principles in legal proceedings, objectiveness, ... and openness."

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#### Economic restructuring

What is the operative content of perestroika? The following excerpts speak for themselves.

"Perestroika means mass initiative. It is the comprehensive development of democracy, socialist selfgovernment, encouragement of initiative and creative endeavor, improved order and discipline. more glasnost, criticism and self-criticism in all spheres of our society. It is utmost respect for the individual and consideration for personal dignity. Perestroika is, among other things, "the universal introduction of economic methods, the renunciation of management by injunction and by administrative methods, and the overall encouragement of innovation ... " means the unity of words and deeds, rights and duties. It is the elevation of honest, highly-gualified labour the overcoming of levelling tendencies in pay and consumerism.". "Only work determines a citizen's real place in society, his social status. And this precludes any manifestation of equalizing .... what we value most is a citizen's contribution to the affairs of the country.

"We must encourage efficiency in production and the talent of a writer, scientist or any other upright and hard-working citizen." On this point we want to be perfectly clear : socialism has nothing to do with

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equalizing. Socialism cannot ensure conditions of life and consumption in accordance with the principle 'From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs.' This will be under communism. Socialism has a different criterion for distributing social benefits : 'From each according to his ability, to each according to his work.''

This, then, is the true economic basis of egalitarianism in the conditions of socialism, according to Gorbachev. 'Perestroika' recognises that taking the right policy decisions is only part of the job and that special effort is needed to make the decisions work.

"Some people hope that everything will immediately change of its own accord, without requiring any special effort. Many think like this : new leaders have emerged, so everything will change now, everything will be all right. It is a mistake, however, to think that from now on it will be an easy ride downhill.. There are also people who do not know how to work in the new way, in the context of perestroika. They have to be taught and they have to be helped. There is also the problem of sluggishness, of inertia. The practice of waiting for instructions from above on every matter, of relying on top-level decisions has not yet been done away with. Not that this is surprising, for this is the way it used to be from workshops to ministries, and it is still having its effect today, even in the upper echelons of administration.

thinking and acting in a responsible and independent way. Herein lies another big problem."

There are no self-executing decisions. The processes of change call for initiatives at every level. Abundance of administrative directions does not guarantee discipline or rationality. On the contrary, it makes for greater arbitrariness.

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 "The emphasis on strict centralization, administration by injunction, and the existence of a great
number of administrative instructions and restrictions belittled the role<sup>c</sup> of law. At some stage this led to arbitrary rule and the reign of lawlessness.."

You cannot fit human societies into pre-fabricated structures. Restructuring is a evolutionary process and continual skepticism and openness are the philosophic foundation of democratic functioning.

"We have no ready-made formulas. Politics is the art of the possible. Taught by bitter experience, we do not run ahead of ourselves on our chosen path, but take account of the evident reality of our country."

On the question of the relationships with the constituent republics of the USSR, Gorbachev sounds caution in his report at the jubilee meeting to mark the 70th annivernary of the 'October revolution':

"And let us.. never forget that we are living in a multinational state, where all social, economic, cultural, and juridical decisions inevitably have a direct and immediate bearing on the nationalities question."

Here is an analysis of the present state of the Soviet economy that no Western critic can match in forthrightness or trenchancy :

"What is the main shortcoming of the old economic machinery? It is above all the lack of inner stimuli for self-development. Indeed, through the system of plan indices, the enterprise receives assignments and resources. Practically all expenses are covered, sales of products are essentially guaranteed and, most importantly, the employees' incomes do not depend on the end results of the collective's work : the fulfilment of contract commitments, production quality and profits. Such a mechanism is likely to produce medium or even poor quality work, whether we like it or not.

"How can the economy advance if it creates preferential conditions for backward enterprises and penalizes the foremost ones? We can no longer run our affairs like that."

I cannot resist the temptation to quote a passage from an analysis of the communist system someone else presented to the world three decades ago : "Dealing

with labor as a factor. in production, working conditions in various enterprises, or the connection between wages and profits, are of no concern to the bureaucracy. Wages and working conditions are determined in accordance with an abstract concept of labor, or in accordance with individual gualifications, with little or no regard for the actual results of production in the respective enterprises of branches of industry.... But the system leads inevitably to lack of interest on the part of the actual producers, i.e., the workers. It also leads to low quality of output, a decline in real productivity and technological progress, and deterioration of plant." This is not Gorbachev, writing in 1987 : this is Milovan Djilas writing exactly thirty years earlier ('THE NEW CLASS; An Analysis of the Communist System<sup>2</sup> by Milovan Djilas, Frederick A. Praeger, Inc., 1957).

The progress from diagnosis to prescription is swift and smooth :

"The new economic mechanism must put matters right. Every enterprise must proceed from real social demands to determine production and sales plans for itself. Those plans must be based not on numerous detailed assignments set by higher bodies, but on direct orders placed by government organisations, self-accounting enterprises and trade firms for specific products of appropriate quantity and quality. Enterprises must be put in such conditions as to encourage economic competition for the best satisfaction of consumer demands and employees' in-

comes must strictly depend on end production results, on profits. These principles have been incorporated in the Law on the State Enterprises (Amalgamation) which came into force on January 1, 1988 . . Work is now under way on legislative forms linked with restructuring the system of managing the national economy, and with a higher role for local bodies of state authority and administration. The scope of the work is very great, considering that about 30,000 national normative acts are operating in our economy. Many of these require substantial changes, and quite often simply abrogration. Thousands have already been cancelled following the introduction of the Law on the State Enterprise."

Perestroika effects a fundamental shift in the distribution of responsibility and power between central planning authorities and managements of enterprises :

"These are trying times for the factory managers : they have a heavy burden of problems that have built up and at the same time they have to change over to self-financing. A lot has still to be decided about determining the functions of ministries, the reorganisation of territorial administration, and the reduction of personnel .. The State Planning Committee will have to give up detailed regimentation and day-to-day monitoring of the work of ministries and departments, and the latter will have to do the same with regard to enterprises. The activities of enterprises (wage funds, profit distribution, payments into the budget, etc.) will be regulated by long-term

economic normatives; this will, in effect, be selfregulation... We have lost too much trying to list all rights of enterprises in different instructions. In fact, it was implied that any undertaking which went beyond these instructions should have been treated as unacceptable. Meanwhile, experience has demonstrated that what we need is not a total legislative regulation of diversified phenomena of social life, but sound rationality, and constant fostering of and support for the worker, workforce, and all forms of popular initiative. Let's strictly observe the principle :

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The task has not been easy. Gorbachev points out :

"Redistribution of rights between the central departments and the enterprises is not proceeding smoothly. The apparatus of the ministries and ministers themselves are unwilling to give up the habit of deciding minor matters themselves. They are used to that practice, which makes it so much easier for them.

Any transfer of rights from the centre to the localities is, in general painful, although, I repeat, the necessity of this is obvious to all, both ministers and staff. They realize that this action benefits the cause, but, 0 nevertheless, charrow departmental and sometimes group interests are put above those of society and the people."

An entire section in the book has the telling title: "Goal: Worldy Technological Standards". This is indeed the primary goal of perestroika. This section of the book compels comparison with Lenin's approach to the question in the years of the celebrated 'New Economic Policy'. Armand Hammer, the American businessman who has dealt with leaders of the Soviet Union from Lenin to Gorbachev reports a conversation he had with Lenin in his memoirs. "What we really need," Hammer records Lenin as saying with his voice ringing stronger and his eyes brightening, "is American capital and technical aid to get out wheels turning once more... The New Economic Policy demands a fresh development of our economic possibilities. We hope to accelerate the process by a system of industrial and commercial concessions to foreigners. It will give great opportunities to the United States. Have you thought of that at all?" When he hinted at bureaucratic delays, says Hammer, Lenin caught his meaning in a flash and this is what he reportedly said : "Bureacrucy, this is one of our curses. I am telling them so all the time. Now here is what I'll do. I'll appoint a special committee of two men, one of whom will be connected with the Peasant and Workers' Inspection Commissariat, and the other with the All-Russian Extraordinary Commissions to deal with this matter and give you all the help they can. You may rest assured that they will act promptly. It shall be done at once." Hammer found Trotsky, then in power, equally helpful when approached, the latter having remarked once curtly, on the point of ideological antipathies, that no true Marxist would allow sentiment to interfere with business. Hammer comments : "Throughout my many years of dealing with top politicians around the world, I have usually found that the ones who are supposed to be prisoners of a rigid

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Ideology are the most, flexible and coolly pragmatic in their judgements — a very strange paradox, but a fact nonetheless." Richard Nixon was famous as a China — baiter, was'nt he, yet he was the one who opened America's trade with China. How badly we need a few paradoxes like these in India, today!

Gorbachev goes on to say :

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"For many years our policy had been to build more and more enterprises. The construction of workshops and, administrative buildings absorbed vast sums. The existing enterprises, meanwhile, remained at the same technological level. But obsolescent equipment would in one way or another drag us backward, since it would mean we would be unable to put out modern products. Old machinery must be given up. This is why we are so drastically changing our structural, and investment policies."

Glasnost, an instrument of guarantee for Perestroika

'Glasnost' (openness), is at once a crucial element in, and the essential means to, the reforms perestroika envisions: Gorbachev clearly expects that openness will work in favour of the radical restructuring he has undertaken and drown the voice of Stalinist orthodoxy. He says:

"The new atmosphere is, perhaps, most vividly manifest in glashost," We want more openness about public affairs in every sphere of life... People are

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becoming increasingly convinced that glasnost is an effective form of public control over the activities of all government bodies, without exception, and a powerful level in correcting shortcomings. We have come to realize the necessity of learning to overcome the inveterate discrepancy between reality and the proclaimed policy. We have begun drafting bills that should guarantee glasnost. These bills are designed to ensure the greatest possible openness in the work of government and mass organisation and to enable working people to express their opinion on any issue of social life and government activity without fear."

Glasnost is not just another piece of reform. It is, by design, the instrument Gorbachev counts on to guarantee the irreversibility of perestroika - the people, once they get used to the ways of a more open society, will not easily accept a return to the past.

The process perestroika has initiated is fraught with difficulties. First, there is the ideological conditioning of 70 years. The personnel changes in the party and the government, which are still apparently incomplete, signify attempts to remove the effect of this conditioning, to start with, at the top echelons of power. Second, there is the bureaucratic impediment. The insistence on 'cost accounting' and 'khozraschot' (financial accountability) is new but crucial to the programme. It calls for radical changes in the attitudes and approaches of the bureaucracy. The third, and most important problem, is the immediate impact of perestroika on the

lives of the people. Glasnost gives the people the opportunity, on a scale on which it was never available before, to articulate their discontent at a time when expectations are high and discontent is bound to deepen. The chances are that the economic situation may get worse in the immediate future, before it gets better, and the leadership shall have to cope with the backlash of glasnost in the intervening period. The stability of the process, indeed the stability of the current regime itself, depends a great deal on how the top leadership copes with the problems of this period of transition. A crisis now may well be the price of progress later.

#### Restructuring, a global process

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#### Non-Soviet communist world

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The restructuring in Chinese economy is now a decade old. China has been open to foreign technology and investment since the late 1970s. More than 4000 enterprises have been set up with foreign capital and still more opportunities continue to be offered. Private family enterprises have been flourishing in rural China. The process of restructuring has received new impetus recently.

The new law on state industrial enterprises, which became effective two months ago, marks a determined effort to loosen the stranglehold of governmental bureaucracy on state enterprises and to guarantee them operational autonomy. It allows enterprises to retain a part of the profits they earn and also penalises failure to make profits. Closure of enterprises and bankruptcy are allowed. It empowers factory managements, among other things, to formulate plans, to evolve their own managerial structures and to administer rewards and punishments to workers and staff. The new law also confers on managements the right to take their own business decisions in the choice of inputs, pricing of products and in entering into contracts including those with foreigners within the overall framework. The fact that the restructuring has involved large scale redeployment of workforce and even significant unemployment has not impeded the steady progress towards greater market orientation in the Chinese economy or its continuing quest for four famous modernisations.'

The struggle for reform has even a longer history in Yugoslavia, Poland and like Hungary, countries. compulsions Political the Czechoslovakia. apart. 'demonstration effect' of perestroika and glasnost in the USSR will predictably renew the urge for restructuring in the whole of Eastern Europe. Romania and Albania have been the laggards in the movement for reform and the results are there for all to see. The communist parties in Western Europe have their own history of revolution marked by efforts to give communism a human face".

#### Non-communist world

Noncommunist 'leftist' parties in the West have been showing remarkable willingness to free themselves from ideological rigidities of the past in response to contemperary realities. Socialist Mitterand is leading France

in its, remarkable drive, for modernisation and technological advance despite the massive redeployment of manpower it involves. As many as 26 enterprises, including some that were nationalised when the socialists came to power in the early 80s, are now being privatised in France. New Zealand is another instance in point; the country has moved towards economic liberalisation under a government led by a Prime Minister of clear 'leftist' orientation.

The capitalist world, too, has been going through its own 'Version' of perestroika. Restructuring of the economy has' been at the heart of 'Reaganism' in the United States and 'Thatcherism' in United Kingdom. If the pattern of voting in the recent internal elections is any indication, the British Labour Party under Kinnock is decisively moving to the centre and will become a party of modernisation. The rising tide of privatisation is steadily sweeping the economies of many countries regardless of the political complexion of the governments in power. Selling of state-owned enterprises is catching on everywhere : in the United Kingdom, in Japan, in Brazil, in Argentina, in Mexico, in Turkey, to mention only a few.

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The labels may be different. Restructuring is now a truly global process. Its direction is the same everywhere and is based on the same realisation : "The individual in our society wants to be part of everything, and this is a good thing. He does not like situations where his opinion is not sought, where he is looked upon merely as manpower and his human and civic

qualities are not appreciated. The collective contract and the democracy which is linked with it are precisely what support a person's sense of being a citizen and a master . If personal interests are disregarded, nothing will come of the effort, and society will only stand to lose." That is Gorbachev, for you!

#### Perestroika and India

But where does all this leave us?

The process of opening up the economy in a purposeful way started in India in 1977. The change of government in 1980 did not mark, despite ideological protestations to the contrary, wholesale reversal of the policy. The gains from the process of liberalisation were obvious and the compulsions not to abandon it were strong internally as well as externally. The present government, when it came to power, sounded a distinctly modern, liberal note on issues of economic policy and took policy initiatives in several areas like licensing, taxation, technology imports as well as foreign trade and investment. There seemed to be a clear desire to loosen the shackles of over-regulation.

All this now seems to be a thing of the past. The policy initiatives got fragmented and lost all coherence in the process of execution.

The clear stream of reason has been lost in the desert sand of dead habit. Only a few of the initiatives really reached the basic constituents of the economy viz. the citizenry. Many failed to transmit the process of change through layers of bureaucracy.

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We need to begin again. The way to go about it is to do it the perestroika way, on a broad front and with determination. A short agenda:

The nexus between the relative strength of political parties in the parliament and the assemblies on the one hand and the number of votes won by them is too loose today. The 'steam-roller' majorities often thrown up by successive elections are products of the resulting distortions. While there is no dearth of ideas, we need to forge a consensus on the means to correct these distortions. The anti-defection law now in operation needs a critical second look. The lowering of the voting age, now under consideration, is a welcome step but care needs to be taken to ensure that the more open politicisation on the campuses does not destroy such fragile discipline as now prevails in our educational institutions.

\* We are a large nation of many races, languages, religions and cultures. We need to strengthen the federal structure by dealing with the issues of sub-nationalism with the same understanding and tact that Gorbachev speaks about. The positive responses of governments the world over to the demands of sub-nationalism are also part of the on-going restructuring process. The demands are already strident in several parts of Soviet Union : perestroika and glasnost will, predictably, compel

positive, if measured, responses. 'New-Federalism', involving reduced dependence of the states on the federal government, has been a basic plank of 'Reagonomics' in the United States. France, under Mitterand, has seen large scale and increasing devolution of resources, with freedom of deployment, to the provinces. Spain, Greece and several other countries have effected similar programmes of devolution in the recent years, the only known exception being the United Kingdom under Mrs. Thatcher. In India, the long years of domination of governments both at the centre and in the states by a single political party under authoritarian control, which reduced Chief Ministers to errand boys, stunted the growth of federalism. If the situation is not remedied effectively and soon, the internal threat to the unity of the national will inevitably grow more ominous.

\* There is no single global balance of power today. What we have in fact, in the present multi-polar world, is a network of regional balances of power. Traditional adversaries everywhere are seeking creative solutions to long-standing conflicts. Witness the changing structure of relations among the U.S.A., the U.S.S.R, and the Peoples' Republic of China. Conferences are not enough. We need stronger foundations to rebuild relationships between nations. Economic co-operation can be an effective solvent of political conflicts. We must explore and utilise areas of such cooperation with our immediate neighbours. The developing rappro-

chment between the Soviet Union and China need not be looked upon as a disadvantage to us. Military needs are, beyond a point, a function of our foreign policy. Given the right policy initiatives, we should be able to free more of our resources for the urgent tasks of development.

\* We still have a judiciary the working of which at least at the top echelons, does us proud. We need to free the judiciary from the pulls and pressures of interference.

The civil service has grown flabby and has lost much of it's initiative. It needs to be trimmed and encouraged to take responsibility under clearly articulated guidelines. The guidelines must not have in them too many 'ifs' and 'buts' for officials to hide behind. We need to foster in our civil servants a culture of 'khozaraschot' (financial accountability), as Gorbachev would say.

\* We need to free the media from governmental control. What we need in this age of glasnost is autonomy for AIR and 'Doordarshan', leaving questions of fame and defamation to the normal process of law and to the power of truth to prevail. ('Satyameva Jayate')

\* The media are not a mere instrument to influence public opinion. They are also, and more importantly; an essential mechanism of feedback that can provide timely signal to the government as to what the public will not stand. By treating them as a road for one-way traffic, as is being done today, the government is denying itself a vital means of self-correction.

- \* We need to devote greater attention and more resources to alleviation of rural poverty and the fight against urban plight. This is essential on grounds of humanity, if not anything else, and certainly for the stability of the system.
- \* Neither the growing chauvinism of parish politicians nor desperate administrative fiats by state governments will effectively reduce the influx of people into our metropolises. What the people need are greater economic opportunities in the rural sector. The district industrial centres are a good idea. But we need to put more resources into them. And we need more such ideas.
- \* Today, our pretensions to detailed physical planning have only negative consequences : they serve only to deny licences and obstruct market-directed growth. It is advisable to give up the pretensions and disband the army of licensing officials and inspectors of this and that who now roam the whole range of our industrial economy. Regulatory functions are better entrusted with autonomous 'boards' or 'commissions', run on professional lines, the government departments being responsible only for policy coordination.

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\* Government already occupies 'the commanding heights of the economy'. In fact, it occupies large chunks of the low valleys as well. It is trying at enormous cost to the economy to produce goods and services of every description. It must quit the valleys and some of the heights.

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- \* 'Nationalisation' and 'take-overs' by the state continue to be the Indian response to industrial sickness. We need a fresh approach : heal, if we can or deal with it as we must.
- \* We must explore a fresh approach even with regard to healthy, state-owned enterprises. Once set up and fairly stable, why not sell the units to the public and recycle the proceeds for investment in areas of priority?
- \* I quoted Armand Hammer earlier. He has this to say on his experience in the Soviet Union : "Of course, we had, to, make an agreement with the trade union to which our workers belonged, and this required lengthy and detailed negotiation. However, the great power and influence of the trade unions was not without its advantages to the employer of labor in Russia. Once the employer had signed a collective agreement with the union branch, there was little risk of strikes or similar

trouble. Both sides were equally bound by the agreement set down in black and white, and the union was strong enough to prevent any infringement by the employees." Do 'agreements' bind employers and employees in India equally? Does the law bind them so? Do the courts hold them both to be so bound?

- \* Tax reform, begun in earnest, has lost its steam. The effort needs to be resumed. And have we done all we can prudently do to attract advanced technology and the foreign investment we need for modernisation?
- This wages of profligacy is indebtedness. Our external debt has grown and internal debt has grown even faster. Knowledgeable observers of the financial scene have pointed out that in about 4 years from now we shall be in the domestic debt trap, that is to say, what the government borrows internally would be adequate only to pay interest on what it has already borrowed. We need to put our borrowed funds into enterprises which can earn a surplus over repayment. A saving rate of 21% is not low in a country where half the population lives in poverty. These savings should not be allowed to be swallowed up by the government fattening itself or wasted in unproductive ventures.

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We used to look to the Soviet model in the 1950s. We must now take courage in both hands and learn the lessons of experience : theirs as well as ours.

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Our government has grown needlessly obese and now sits heavy on the backs of the people. The growth of the government is now the biggest impediment to the growth of the economy. This, too, is a part of the message of perestroika.

The views expressed in this booklet are not necessarily those of the \*Forum of Free Enterprise.

"People must come to accept private enterprise not as a necessary evil, but as an affirmative good."

- Eugene Black

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## Have you joined the Forum?

The Forum of Free Enterprise is a non-political and non-partisan organisation, started in 1956, to educate public opinion in India on free enterprise and its close relationship with the democratic way of life. The Forum seeks to stimulate public thinking on vital economic problems of the day through booklets and leaflets, meetings, essay competitions, and other means as befit a democratic society.

Membership is open to all who agree with the Manifesto of the Forum. Annual membership fee is Rs.30/-(entrance fee, Rs. 20/-) and Associate Membership fee, Rs. 12/- (entrance fee, Rs. 8/-). Graduate course students can get our booklets and leaflets by becoming Student Associates on payment of Rs.  $^{r}$  only. (No entrance fee).

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Published by M.R. PAI for the Forum of Free Enterprise, "Piramal Mansion", 235 Dr. D.N. Road, Bombay-400 001, and printed by TUSHAR Goshalia at Tara Enterprises, 81/7, Raju Villa, Brahmanwada Road, King's Circle, Bombay-400019.