The Great Gatsby: A Rich Man in India

Finding a rich man – the controversial reputation of Arindam Chaudhuri – the Satbari campus – the Power Brands Awards Night – the ambassador of the world – cigar therapy – a leadership seminar – the enemies – the aspirers – the namesake

I

A phenomenally wealthy Indian who excites hostility and suspicion is an unusual creature, a fish that has managed to muddy the waters it swims in. The glow of admiration lighting up the rich and the successful disperses before it reaches him, hinting that things have gone wrong somewhere. It suggests that beneath the sleek coating of luxury, deep under the sheen of power, there is a failure barely sensed by the man who owns that failure along with his expensive accoutrements. This was Arindam Chaudhuri’s situation when I first met him in 2007. He had achieved great wealth and prominence, partly by projecting an image of himself as wealthy and prominent. Yet somewhere along the way he had also created the opposite effect, which — in spite of his best efforts — had given him a reputation as a fraud, scamster and Johnny-come-lately.

We’ll come to the question of frauds and scams later, but it is indisputable that Arindam had arrived very quickly. It had taken him just about a decade to build his business empire, but because his rise was so swift and his empire so blurry, it was possible to be quite ignorant of his existence unless one were particularly sensitive to the tremors created by new wealth in India. Indeed, throughout the years of Arindam’s meteoric rise, I had been happily oblivious of him, although once I had heard of him, I began to see him everywhere: in the magazines his media division published, flashing their bright colours and inane headlines at me from little news-stands made out of
bricks and plastic sheets; in buildings fronted by dark glass where I imagined earnest young men imbibing the ideas of leadership disseminated by Arindam; and on the tiny screen in front of me on a flight from Delhi to Chicago when the film I had chosen for viewing turned out to have been produced by him. A Bombay gangster film, shot on a low budget, with a cast of unknown, modestly paid actors and actresses: was it an accident that the film was called *Mithya*? The word means ‘lies’.

Still, I suppose we choose our own entanglements, and when I look back at the time in Delhi that led up to my acquaintance with Arindam, I realize that my meeting with him was inevitable. It was my task that summer to find a rich man as a subject, about the making and spending of money in India. In Delhi, there existed in plain sight some evidence of what such making and spending of money amounted to. I could see it in the new road sweeping from the airport through south Delhi, turning and twisting around office complexes, billboards and a granite-and-glass shopping mall on the foothills of the Delhi Ridge that, when completed, would be the largest mall in Asia. Around this landscape and its promise of Delhi as another Dubai or Singapore, I could see the many not-rich people and aspiring-to-be rich people, masses of them, on foot and on two-wheelers, packed into decrepit buses or squeezed into darting yellow-and-black auto-rickshaws, people quite inconsequential in relation to the world rising around and above them. The beggar children who performed somersaults at traffic lights, the boys displaying menacing moustaches inked on to their faces, made it easy to tell who the rich were amid this swirling mass. The child acrobats focused their efforts at the Toyota Innova minivans and Mahindra Scorpio SUVs waiting at the crossing, their stunted bodies straining to reach up to the high windows.

I felt that such scenes contained all that could be said about the rich in India, and the people I took out to expensive lunches offered me little more than glosses on the above. Mittal, Ambani, Dabur, Swarovski crystals, gold-plated toilets, stud farms, nightclubs, private aircraft. They sounded boring, unlike Arindam, who seemed a little different, with images and contradictions swirling around him:
ponytail, controversy, management guru, bloggers, business school, magazines, Bollywood movies.

‘I’ve spoken to the boss about you,’ Sutanu said. ‘But the boss said, “Why does he want to meet me?”’

Sutanu ran the media division in Arindam’s company. We met at Flames, an ‘Asian Resto-Bar’ up a steep flight of steps with a forlorn statue of Buddha tucked away in the corner, the view from the restaurant opening out to sanitary-goods stores, franchise eating outlets and large cars being squeezed into minuscule spaces by scruffy parking attendants. Sutanu was in his forties, a dark man with thick, clumpy hair parted to one side, a bushy moustache and glasses, his raffish 1960s air complemented by a bright-blue shirt and a red tie patterned with elephants. He was accompanied by Rahul, a studious-looking young man in kurta and jeans who worked at one of the magazines published by the company. Although they couldn’t have been there long, their table gave an impression of a party that had been in progress through the morning and had peaked. It held two packs of Navy Cut cigarettes, a partly empty bottle of Kingfisher beer and a battered smartphone with a black-and-white screen that rang out in insistent drumbeats throughout our conversation.

‘The boss is a great man, and sure, his story is interesting,’ Sutanu said. ‘The question is whether he’ll talk to you.’

From what Sutanu told me that afternoon, Arindam was very much a man of the times. He had started out in 1996 with a lone business school called the Indian Institute of Planning and Management. Founded by Arindam’s father, it had been – Sutanu said dismissively – a small, run-of-the-mill place located on the outskirts of Delhi. But Arindam had expanded it into nine branches in most of the major Indian cities, and he was now going international. He had an institute in Dubai, had tied up with a management school in Belgium with campuses in Brussels and Antwerp, was opening an institute in London by the end of the year, and would have another one in the United States, in an old factory building in Pennsylvania. And that was just the management institute. Arindam’s company, Planman, had a media division that included a newsweekly, The Sunday Indian, ‘perhaps the
only magazine in the world with thirteen editions’. There were three business magazines, a software company, a consulting division that managed the ‘HR component of multinationals’, and a small outsourcing company. The outsourcing company was small only because it was new, but it already did the entire online content of the Guardian as well as the proofreading and copy-editing of the Daily Mail.

‘There’s also a film division, and he’s produced a major Bollywood blockbuster,’ Sutanu said.

‘It was meant to be a blockbuster,’ Rahul said quietly. ‘But it flopped.’

‘Yeah, yeah, no big deal,’ Sutanu said. ‘He’s on other blockbuster projects. He’s a man of ideas. So sometimes they flop.’ He lit a cigarette and waved it around, the rings on his hand flashing. ‘What he’s doing, he’s using intellectual capital to make his money. But people don’t get that and because he’s been bad-mouthed so much, he’s become suspicious. He’s been burned by the media. You know, cynical hacks they are. They make up stories that he’s a fraud. A Johnny-come-lately. Everyone asks, “Yaar, but where does all that money come from?”’

There was a moment of silence as we contemplated this question.

‘They don’t ask these things of other businessmen,’ Sutanu continued. ‘That’s because when the mainstream media does these negative stories on him, just hatchet jobs you know, they’re serving the interests of the big industrialists. The industrialists don’t like him because our magazines have done critical stories on them. The government doesn’t like him and harasses him all the time. They say, “You can’t use the word ‘Indian’ in the name of your management school because we don’t recognize your school.” That it’s forbidden in the constitution to use “Indian” in the name of an educational institution unless it’s been approved by the government. Something like that. They send us a letter every six months about this. Then, the elite types are after him. The Doon School, St Stephen’s, Indian Institute of Management people. There were these bloggers – a Business Today journalist and a man who worked for IBM – who started writing silly stuff about him, saying that the institute doesn’t give every student a laptop as promised in the advertisements. You want
to know how he makes money? It’s simple. There are two thousand students who pay seven lakhs¹ each. The operating costs are low—you know how much teachers get paid in India. So the money gets spun off into other businesses.’

We ate hot and sour soup and drank more beer, our conversation widening out into discussions about careers, lives and the unforgiving city of Delhi. Rahul, who had been a television journalist, told us a story about covering the war in Iraq and being arrested by Saddam Hussein’s Republican Guard while crossing over the border from Jordan.

When it was time to depart, I felt reluctant to break up the drunken afternoon bonhomie. Nevertheless, I asked, ‘When do I get to meet Arindam Chaudhuri?’

‘The good thing about the boss is that he’s a yes or no sort of person,’ Sutanu replied. ‘You’ll find out in a couple of days whether he wants to meet you.’

The couple of days stretched into a week. Now that my interest in Arindam had grown, it was hard to miss his presence. Every newspaper and magazine I came across carried a full-page advertisement for the management school, with Arindam’s photograph displayed prominently in the ads. It was the face of the new India caught in close-up view. His hair was swept back in a ponytail, dark and gleaming against a pale, smooth face, his designer glasses accentuating his youthfulness. He wore a blue suit in the picture, and his teeth were exposed in the kind of bright, white smile I associated with American businessmen and evangelists. But instead of looking directly at the reader, as businessmen and evangelists tend to do to assure people of their trustworthiness, Arindam was gazing at a distant horizon, as if along with the business he was promoting, there was some other elusive goal on his mind.

Beneath the picture, there was information about the Indian Institute of Planning and Management, with nine campuses in seven cities that encircled the Indian subcontinent and left vacant only a small

¹ One lakh is 100,000. A crore is 100 lakhs or 10 million.
stretch of unconquered territory in the east. There were few details about the programme or admission requirements, but there were many small, inviting photographs of the Delhi campus: a swimming pool, a computer lab, a library, a snooker table, Indian men in suits and a blonde woman. Around these pictures, in text that exploded into a fireworks display of italics, exclamation marks and capital letters, were the perks given to students: ‘Free Study Tour to Europe etc. for 21 Days’, ‘World Placements’ and ‘Free Laptops for All’. Stitching these disparate elements together was a slogan. ‘Dare to Think Beyond the IIMs’, it said, referring to the elite, state-subsidized business schools, and managing to sound promising, admonishing and mysterious at the same time.

I kept pestering Sutanu, calling and text-messaging him. Then it was done, an appointment made, and I entered the wonderland to meet Arindam Chaudhuri, the man in the picture, the management guru, the media magnate, the business school entrepreneur, the film producer, the owner of IT and outsourcing companies, to which we should add his claims of being a noted economist and author of the ‘all-time best-sellers’ The Great Indian Dream and Count Your Chickens Before They Hatch.

Arindam was a few shades darker than his picture, with glossy hair tied back in a ponytail. He wore a blue pinstriped suit, with a white shirt open a third of the way down his smooth, shaved chest. There were rings on his fingers and bright, sparkling stones on the frame of his designer glasses. He sported silver cufflinks on his sleeves, and argyle socks and shiny pumps on his feet. I felt under a mild sensory assault from all those glittering surfaces, but they were accompanied by a youthfulness that softened the effect. He was thirty-six, younger than me, with a boyish air that was particularly pronounced when he became sarcastic about his critics and rivals and said, ‘Wow!’

We were meeting at the Delhi campus of IIPM, in a boardroom that looked out at an open-plan office to one side and to classrooms at
the other end. The furniture was in bright shades of red and blue, with a projection screen flickering blankly on one wall. There were about fifty chairs in the room, most of them pushed to one side, and Arindam and I sat at one end of a long table, our chairs swivelled to face each other. The air conditioning was fierce, and after a couple of hours I began to feel cold in my summer garb of a short-sleeved shirt and cotton trousers, but Arindam went on speaking, slowing down only slightly when a worker brought us chicken sandwiches on paper plates and cups of Coca-Cola.

Like most of the new rich in India, Arindam hadn’t started from scratch. He had inherited his management institute from his father, Malay Chaudhuri, who began it in 1973. But the original institute had hardly been cutting edge. The office, in a house in south Delhi, had been a family bedroom at night. As for Gurgaon, where the institute was located, ‘it was the least developed place on earth’. I understood why Arindam wanted to emphasize this. Gurgaon, an area just across the Delhi border in the state of Haryana, is now a modern suburb, hosting office parks for multinationals, as well as condominiums and shopping malls. Forty minutes from south Delhi on the new highway, it is a satellite city serving India’s upper-tier professional classes, offering a branch of the London department store Debenhams and an Argentinean restaurant serving imported beef. But in the seventies, when Arindam’s father ran his management institute in Gurgaon, the place had been little more than an assortment of unpaved roads meandering through fields of wheat, with electricity and phone lines in short supply, a no-man’s-land between Delhi and the vast rural hinterland of India where a management school would have seemed like just one more of those strange, minor cults that crop up in India from time to time.

The expansion, the acquisitions and the overdrive started only after Arindam entered the picture. He had wanted to go to college in the United States, but his father convinced him to enrol in the family institute as one of the first students in a new undergraduate programme in management. Before he had even graduated, he was teaching a course at the institute. ‘I took advantage of being the director’s son,’ Arindam said, laughing but making it clear that he
had been perfectly qualified to teach his fellow students. Three years after finishing his degree, he started a recruitment consulting firm. His rationale was that by getting into a position where he was hiring people for other companies, he would also be able to find jobs for IIPM graduates with his clients. The placement of IIPM graduates was a pressing problem at the time, and although Arindam would disagree, it remains a problem now, after all his success.

During those early years, however, Arindam’s ambitions were disproportionate to his abilities and experience. He started a magazine and a research division, but the magazine closed quickly and his recruitment firm failed to take off. He had nothing to sell except himself. ‘In 1997, I announced my first leadership workshop for senior executives under the banner “Become a great leader”. My thinking was that if they can take leadership lessons from me, they will give me business. So they came, not realizing from the photos how young this guy was. And then it didn’t matter, because that first workshop was a rocking interactive supersuccess.’ His voice rose, his chin lifted with pride and he looked me in the eyes. ‘That is how we built a brand.’

The drive to IIPM’s campus, located roughly midway between Delhi and Gurgaon, is a fairly quick one. First come the temples of Chattarpur, modern structures with crenellated, fluted walls, where memories of old Hindu architecture have been transformed into a simple idea of excess. A gargantuan statue of Hanuman, the monkey god, stands with a mace on his shoulder, looking dismissively down at the traffic, while the temples sprawl endlessly on that flat landscape, each the capital of an imaginary Hindu kingdom that has never existed except in this shapeless present.

The road is dusty, sometimes empty, and sometimes crowded with vehicles ranging from small trucks to air-conditioned SUVs. There are occasional clusters of shops and houses, but they disappear quickly, giving way to large stretches of land partitioned off for the very rich. A few boutique hotels appear now and then, looking empty, but the land is mostly colonized by ‘farmhouses’ – weekend homes for the Delhi rich that celebrate wealth, and where entertainment for the guests can range from an American rock star on a
downward career curve to upwardly mobile Ukrainian prostitutes. Nothing of this is visible from the road, of course, with the farmhouses closed off by walls, gates and security guards, and all I saw on my first drive along that route were walls edged with broken glass, the occasional flash of green from a well-tended lawn, the curve of a driveway where a gate had been left open, and a young peasant woman with a suitcase sitting in front of a large farmhouse.

It was amid these hotels and farmhouses that IIPM had its five-acre, high-walled Delhi campus. The gates were kept shut, and the campus had a sleepy air except when Arindam was due to arrive. On those occasions, the security guards hovered around the guardhouse in the front, looking at their watches and fingering their walkie-talkies. The scruffy management students on campus, who, in their odd assortment of blazers and flashy shirts, had the air of men just coming off an all-night wedding party, adjusted their postures, trying not to look as if they were loitering.

Arindam arrived in a blaze of activity, the gates being opened hurriedly for his metallic-blue luxury car, a million-pound Bentley Continental that coasted down the driveway and parked in front of the building lobby. Another flash of blue, another gathering of employees, and then Arindam was inside the building, leaving behind nothing but the frisson of his arrival and the Bentley gleaming in the fierce Delhi sun. The power and the glory! A million pounds! Custom-made in the mother country of England! A Bentley was the ultimate status symbol of the Indian rich – expensive and relatively uncommon. A business journalist, unaware that I knew Arindam, had told me the probably apocryphal story that Arindam had had the special paint scraped off when his car arrived from England, repainting it to a shade of blue that matched one of his favourite shirts.

The campus building was split along two levels. Most of the classrooms were on the basement floor, filled with the chatter of students, some of them dressed in suits if they happened to be attending a class in ‘Executive Communications’. The ground floor contained a computer lab, a small library and some classrooms. On the other side of the panopticon boardroom was the open-plan office, with Planman employees at their computers and phones. They were mostly in their
twenties and thirties, and although they looked busy, they didn’t give
the impression of running a global megabusiness. Arindam and his
division heads referred to the people behind the desks as ‘managerial
staff’, although when I introduced myself to one of the managers – a
balding, middle-aged man – he seemed to be making cold calls, look-
ing up numbers from a database and asking people if they were
interested in taking management seminars.

Almost all the Planman employees – 90 per cent of them, accord-
ing to Arindam – were former IIPM students. The same was true of
the faculty members, who tended to morph from students to teach-
ers as soon as they had finished their courses. Many of the faculty
members did ‘consulting’ work for IIPM. Some, like Rohit Man-
chanda, a short, dapper man in a suit who probably would have been
shorter without the unusually high heels of his shoes, taught adver-
tising and headed Planman’s small advertising agency. The dean of
IIPM, Prasoon Majumdar, a man with a smart goatee, was also eco-
nomics editor for the magazines published by Planman. Then there
were the employees who were family members as well as former stu-
dents. Arindam’s wife, Rajita, a petite woman who drove a Porsche,
had been a student of Arindam’s before they got married and now
taught Executive Communications. Arindam’s sister’s husband, a
young man with shoulder-length hair, shirt left unbuttoned to reveal
a generous expanse of chest and carrying a copy of The Omnivore’s
Dilemma when I first met him, was a former student, a faculty mem-
er and features and lifestyle editor of the magazines published by
Planman.

When Arindam met his division heads, all of whom had been his
classmates at IIPM, they joked and chatted for the first hour or so
before turning to the work at hand. I sat in on a meeting one morn-
ing, and they seemed to derive immense collegial pleasure from
demonstrating to me just how close-knit they were. ‘We’re like the
Mafia,’ Arindam said.

It was a comparison that had occurred to me, although there were
other metaphors that also came to mind. They were like the Mafia in
their suspicion of outsiders, like a dot.com in their emphasis on col-
egiality and like a cult in their belief in a mythology made up of
Arindam’s personal history, management theories and the strange ways in which the company functioned. But perhaps all this is simply another way of saying that they were a business, operating through an unquestioning adherence to what their owner said and believed.

Arindam, in our first meeting, had explained to me in a monologue that lasted five hours that his business was built around the ‘brand’ of Planman Consulting, the group that includes the business school and numerous other ventures from media and motion pictures to a charitable foundation. To an outsider, however, the brand is Arindam. Even if his role is disguised under the description of ‘honorary dean’ of IIPM, the image of the business school and Planman is in most ways the image of Arindam Chaudhuri. With his quirky combination of energy, flamboyance, ambition, canniness – and even vulnerability – he is the promise of the age, his traits gathering force from their expression at a time in India when everything seems combustible, everyone is volatile and all that is solid melts into air.

One evening, after receiving a text-message invitation from one of Arindam’s many minions, I showed up at the Park Royal Hotel in south Delhi. The auto-rickshaw I had flagged down took me past Select Citywalk, a new shopping mall in its final stages of construction, a pharaonic dream of glass and granite rising amid broken sidewalks where daily-wage labourers huddled under dwarfish tents made from sheets of plastic. The road to the Chirag Delhi crossing was jammed, the traffic squeezed into narrow lanes by a wide aisle in the centre where the government was trying to build a high-speed bus corridor. It remained crowded all the way on to the Ring Road, with buses, cars and motorcycles brawling for space, and I was relieved to get off outside the Park Royal, where a sign forbade auto-rickshaws from entering.

I walked up a steep driveway towards the brutalist, looming structure of the Park Royal. The traffic smog and summer heat gave way to an artificial chill as I stepped past the bowing doormen, and time
itself seemed to slow down on the thick carpeting, anxious not to provoke the flashy Indians and foreign tourists wandering around the overpriced restaurants and handicraft shops. I was at the hotel to witness the ‘Power Brands Awards Night’ sponsored by 4Ps, one of the three business magazines published by Arindam. The sign in the lobby announcing the event, gold letters arranged on a red board like an unfinished Scrabble game, was pathetically small, and it took me a while to find the place where the event was being staged.

There weren’t too many people inside the Royal Ballroom auditorium on the eighth floor, and those attending seemed visibly impatient. The vast chandeliers loomed above rows of empty chairs, and on the stage, a projector played endless clips of motorcycles zooming along deserted highways. Eventually, people began to trickle into the front rows, men in suits whose expressions of self-content seemed to suggest that they were among the power brands being felicitated that night. After a while, a dapper, shaven-headed man showed up onstage to give out the awards. His name was A. Sandip and, in keeping with the multiplicity of roles held by people at Planman, he was a senior executive at the company, editor in chief of all the magazines and dean of the business school. Polite applause followed the handing out of each certificate and plaque, the claps punctuated by clips of revving motorcycles – Yamaha was an event sponsor and one of the power brands being celebrated – and then the ceremony was over. Smoke rose from the stage and a local band began belting out a Hindi pop song, asking the audience to start jiving as they sang.

But where was the audience? The auditorium had emptied out rapidly, while outside, in the passageway, the crowd was thick around the buffet tables laden with Western and Indian food, guests and waiters collaborating in a chaotic dance that involved plates piled with alarmingly red tandoori chicken. At the ends of the passageway, fresh-faced young women waited behind stacks of free Planman magazines, smiling hopefully but in futility; it was always going to be a losing contest with the tandoori chicken. I made my way past the buffet tables to the open-air balcony. It was packed, with people pressed hard against the bar, releasing cigarette smoke into the
evening air while far below the traffic honked and swerved its way towards the brightly lit Nehru Place flyover.

Throughout the awards ceremony, Arindam had been standing at the back of the Royal Ballroom. When I returned from the bar, he was still there, shaking hands with people who stepped into the nearly empty auditorium and addressed him in low, conspiratorial voices. Arindam was dressed in blue, his clothes and slicked-back hair giving him a glamorous look amid the Indians and the Japanese (presumably representatives of Yamaha) wearing staid suits or chinos and polo shirts and the IIPM students (or Planman employees) in their uniform-like formals. Even the band – the men in tight jeans and sleeveless shirts, the women in sequinned skirts – couldn’t compete with Arindam’s star value, serving as no more than a noisy backdrop for the primary business of the evening.

As I watched people circling around Arindam in the Royal Ballroom, it seemed to me that the evening was not so much about the recognition of other companies and products as about making a statement on the Arindam power brand and his 4Ps (product, price, place and promotion). This was why Arindam was working instead of lining up for the buffet, shaking hands and exchanging small talk. I hovered near him, receiving swift appraising glances from the strangers delivered to Arindam by an efficient assembly line of ambition. Those meeting him expressed deference, desire and nervousness; some were matter-of-fact, one business tycoon talking to another, as it were; others were proprietorial, expressing mild outrage that he hadn’t noticed them yet or that they would have to wait for the person ahead of them to finish; a few, it seemed to me, concealed hostility even as they ingratiated themselves with him. The only time I saw Arindam get away from the constant handshaking, from the pleasantries and the promises, was when Doordarshan, the government television channel, interviewed him on the state of the economy, taking him to a small lobby and posing him in front of a painting of an Indian raja with a resplendent moustache and red robes.

There would presumably have been more glamorous television channels at the event if Arindam had been at the very top of the pecking order of wealth. Or was it that – as Sutanu had suggested – the largest
media organizations were spurning him for his anti-elitism, for the crusading zeal of his magazines? They had certainly embraced him wholeheartedly when he first became a celebrity. At the IIPM campus in Satbari, I had picked up a brochure that featured a double-page spread of the articles that appeared when Arindam first made his mark as ‘The Guru with a Ponytail’. The earliest pictures displayed a baby face; the designer glasses were not yet part of his appearance. Indistinguishable from press releases, these articles reproduced Arindam’s thoughts on everything from ‘how not to create more Osamas’ (the solution, apparently, was ‘wholesome education’) to ‘the MBA mafia’ monopolizing management education in the country through the IIMs. But if Arindam was ‘Guru Cool’ in these articles, he was also combative (and the combative stance certainly enhanced the ‘cool’), attacking the IIMs and pushing his ‘Theory i Management’ (the lower-case ‘i’ stood for ‘india’) to speak about a compassionate form of capitalism that took into account the overwhelming presence of poverty in the country. He talked about ‘trickle-down economics’ and ‘survival of the weakest’, and although it was never clear from these extracts how such concepts could actually be put into practice, they exhibited Arindam’s desire to project himself as a thinker as well as an entrepreneur.

But Arindam’s desire for greater influence also created a conflict with his closed style of running the company. Within Planman, he was surrounded by loyalists, people who subscribed to the cult of Arindam. Relatives became colleagues, while former students and classmates became employees and continued to refer to him in the nice, middle-class Indian way as ‘Arindam sir’. The employees were so enamoured of Arindam that when I visited him at the IIPM campus or stood near him at the Power Brands Awards Night, some of them displayed a barely disguised hostility. Upset at the proximity I had stolen, sensing perhaps that I did not entirely share their faith in the guru, that I was not one of them, they seethed with the desire to protect Arindam from me.

Yet Arindam’s business could not be contained entirely within the walls of Planman. It had a centrifugal force to it, spiralling outwards. In June 2005, nearly a decade after his first failed attempt at starting a magazine, Arindam began publishing a business magazine called B&E.
led to the newsweekly *The Sunday Indian*, and to the marketing magazine *4Ps*. They were all printed on glossy paper, heavy on graphics and syndicated material, thin on original content and, going by the mis-spelled names appearing on *The Sunday Indian* covers (‘Pamela Andreson’), short of copy editors. In 2007, Arindam began bringing out an Indian edition of *PC Magazine* under licence from Ziff Davis Media. At the same time, he began discussions with *Foreign Affairs* in New York to bring out an Indian edition of the magazine, and when that fell through, he began negotiations with *Foreign Policy* in Washington, DC.

‘In the school, I have an audience of only six thousand students,’ he had said to me. ‘Now, every week, I reach one lakh people.’

The business schools also produced ‘academic’ journals with names like *The Indian Economy Review*, *The Human Factor*, *Strategy Journal* and *Need the Dough?* But the most significant arena of influence was occupied by films, turning Arindam almost into a household name.

In 2002, Arindam had entered the movie business. A few days before his first Bollywood film was to be shot, Arindam said, the director walked out on him. Arindam, naturally, decided to direct the film himself. He admitted to me that he had perhaps not been entirely qualified to do this. ‘But I hope, some day, when I have more experience, to make a truly revolutionary film.’ Without the necessary experience, his first directorial venture turned out to be neither revolutionary nor a blockbuster. With a plot that had been lifted from the American comic strip *Archie*, it was a commercial flop and panned by critics. Even the DVD stores in the Palika Bazaar underground market that specialized in cinema of all kinds, mostly in pirated editions, were unable to procure a copy for me, and the only interesting thing about the film seemed to be its title, *Rok Sako to Rok Lo*, which translates into *Stop Me if You Can*.

4

A country that has seen a sudden infusion of wealth and a rapid disengagement with its past tends to throw up people who are travelling very quickly and seem to have no clear antecedents. A few days after
I attended the power brands ceremony, an email from a friend directed me to the annual world wealth report produced by the investment banking firm Merrill Lynch, which had ranked India, with 100,000 millionaires, as the world’s second-fastest producer of millionaires, running just behind Singapore. It made me think of a factory producing millionaires at high speed, and when I surfed around on the Internet, checking out related articles from *Forbes* and *The Economist*, I felt as if I had been granted a slightly dizzying satellite vision of the country, one remarkably different from the view on the ground.

There were carefully produced graphics on these websites, with towers thrusting out from the flat map of India, their different heights announcing the amount and concentration of personal wealth in the country. Bombay, now known as Mumbai, had the tallest tower, which made sense. There, India’s richest man Mukesh Ambani (who, in a piece of news concocted by the Indian media, had become the world’s richest man in October 2007, ahead of Bill Gates and Warren Buffett) planned to build a skyscraper in the most expensive area of the city. Sixty storeys high, it would have just twenty-seven floors because of its vertiginously high ceilings. And the only residents in the building apart from the Ambani family would be their retinue of 600 servants.

A little over forty years ago, the *New Yorker* writer Ved Mehta visited the country of his birth and wrote a piece called ‘The Richest Man in India’. This august personage, according to Mehta, was not an industrialist or a politician. He was the Nizam of Hyderabad, a southern ruler who had been stripped of his monarchy and much of his wealth by the Indian state in the years following independence in 1947. Although the Nizam was a political nonentity by the time Mehta wrote about him, he was still reputed to be the richest man in India and one of the richest in the world. Leafing through the pages of an official biography, Mehta found the Nizam described as ‘a national asset of incalculable value’, especially in a modernizing India whose ‘most crying need is liquid investable capital’.

The passage of four decades has seen to it that India is awash in liquid investable capital, if only in select areas, and the Nizam appears...
even more of an oddity now than he did to Mehta at the time. A five-foot-three, ninety-pound waif who took his meals on a tin plate while squatting on a mat, the Nizam’s relation to his personal wealth was royally idiosyncratic, supremely indifferent to portfolio diversification or conspicuous consumption.

Every age gets the rich people it deserves. In contemporary India, the new rich are the anti-Nizams. They are people in a hurry, expressing fevered modes of consumption, flaunting gargantuan appetites meant to astonish and dazzle the rest of us. They acquire things that are better, bigger and more exclusive, and while coolly expecting public admiration, they also attempt to carve out their own affluent nations, towers from the tops of which float prayers in a strange language, expressing desires that most of us can’t comprehend. This is because there is a paradox at the heart of such affluence, where each rich individual, while being celebrated for his or her wealth, also expects to be something other than his or her wealth. People are the amount of money they make, but even in the world of the Indian rich, that is no longer enough.

This paradox of wealth became evident to me one evening at the Delhi Gymkhana Club, a formerly colonial establishment sited next to the prime minister’s residence. I had been taken there by friends amused by my interest in India’s new money. After we parked the car and walked past empty rooms with high ceilings, and long corridors featuring sepia tints of colonial clubgoers, we entered a crowded and noisy bar. From our corner table, chosen for its sweeping view, I watched the generously proportioned Delhi residents – businesspeople, civil servants and politicians – consume subsidized food and liquor, ringing little bells to call waiters to their overflowing tables. It was Thursday, a dance night at the club, and as the evening progressed, a sizeable contingent of the city’s youth appeared on the scene, sending the middle-aged men in the crowd into a frenzied search for prospective partners among the young women in tight jeans.

The man who approached our table soon after the dancing began possessed a shock of white hair, a bushy moustache and two gold chains under his green polo shirt. My friends introduced us, but it
was hard for me to make out what he did above the rendition of ‘Hava Nagila’ from the club band.

‘I work for the world,’ he said.

It seemed an especially unlikely claim in that setting, and I felt compelled to ask, ‘Yes, but what exactly do you do for the world?’

‘Ambassador,’ he said. ‘I am an ambassador for the world.’

He looked at my friends, looked at me and smiled at his private joke. Then he passed me his business card, which read:

THE WORLD

Abhai Varma
Ambassador
www.aboardtheworld.com

*The World* was a cruise ship sailing across the globe, registered in the Bahamas and managed by a Miami-based company. Varma wanted to impress upon me just how exclusive this cruise ship was. People bought an *apartment* on the ship — *apartment* was the word he emphasized with some violence, just as he had emphasized *world* and *ambassador* before — for half a million dollars, at the very least. The money covered all expenses incurred on board, and the amount of money paid determined the number of votes residents had, who then, through the democratic exercise of their voting powers, determined the itinerary of the ship. When people went ashore, they partied, paying out of their own pockets for the pleasures of *terra firma*, but they tended to live more quietly on the ship, dabbling in refined pleasures like haute cuisine and art. Americans formed a large part of the contingent, but there were many Indians as well, and Varma’s role was to match the right people from the Indian subcontinent to this floating signifier of his. *The World* was a cruise ship, its ambassador a salesman.

As for the clients, those who bought a piece of the world, Varma was both guarded about them and insistent about their *exclusivity*. He wouldn’t give me the names of his clients, usually picked out from
marketing lists compiled by companies like American Express, but he said that he had to see that people wouldn’t board *The World* and start talking about the amount of money they had made.

I understood why Varma was concerned that people might talk about money on board the ship. India was full of people talking about money. Just half an hour earlier, in the men’s room, I had passed a drunken group listening to a man who was saying, ‘All the people I went to school with, they became doctors, engineers. I’m the one who became an ordinary garment exporter.’ He waited a beat before delivering his punchline. ‘I earn a hundred times more than them,’ he said, producing a burst of appreciative, alcohol-fuelled laughter from his listeners.

To avoid such situations, Varma encouraged each prospective client to make a short trip on *The World* at a cost of $1,500 a day. ‘That’s the stage,’ he said, ‘when having dinner with other apartment owners, he’ll learn not to flash his wealth. Everyone around him will be super rich, and they’ll consider him crude if he talks about money. Either he’ll learn to shut up, or he’ll get off at the next port and not come back.’

Manish was used to rich people who talked about money. He was a pleasant young man, handsome in a generic way and with a veneer of softness that made him good at his business as a cigar dealer. He was one of India’s two cigar importers, insinuating his products into hotels, bars and clubs, serving not only affluent metropolises like Delhi but also the second-tier cities that were full of people he described as ‘aspirational’. Manish started laughing when he talked about these aspirational people, but he was accommodating in every way possible to the whims of his customers. For those in Delhi, he held monthly gatherings, usually sponsored by liquor companies, where men sat around on stuffed leather couches, learning the fine art of cigar smoking in relative privacy and connecting with each other through a dense haze of smoke. But Manish also delivered cigars to the homes of his clients, to business celebrations and wedding parties, ready with suggestions if people were uncertain about which cigars might make the greatest impression on their guests.
I had gone to see Manish in his shop, a glass-fronted store called ‘Kastro’s Cigars’. From the store, one looked out on to the winding walkways and upscale boutiques of the Santushti Shopping Complex, all of it built to a scale so small as to look like a shopping mall from Legoland. It could have been one of the more expensive retail complexes in America were it not for the fact that the land was owned by the Indian Air Force, and the cigars and designer handbags were being sold only a short walk from an airbase guarded by dour soldiers with thick moustaches and big rifles. The rents were subsidized, and the shops were offered only to senior defence personnel and their relatives, or to those with political contacts.

On the afternoon I visited Manish’s store, we sat by ourselves in the front section. He had one employee, a Mizo woman from the north-eastern part of India dressed smartly in a Western suit. She brought us cappuccinos from a nearby Parsi restaurant and receded into the background, while we lounged on the armchairs, looking out at the shoppers trickling through the boutiques, at heavily jewelled women holding the hands of thickset men, and an ayah with a pushchair following a mother and her friend. Behind us, separated by a picture window and a door, was the temperature-controlled part of the shop where the cigars were kept on partitioned shelves running along one wall. On one side of the shelves were copies of *Cigar Aficionado*, while on the other end were lockers where customers kept their stock, each locker the distillation of a life.

Manish’s best customer, the one whose locker held the most expensive cigars – Cohibas, a box of twenty-five selling in Manish’s shop for 27,000 rupees – was someone who never smoked them. They were gifts for bureaucrats and politicians, people who were useful to his business. I could build a personality from that detail, and it was tempting to do so. I thought of the wheeling and dealing the nameless man was involved in: was it my imagination that Manish seemed slightly nervous, a little wary, when we talked about the owner of this particular locker? I thought of the self-control and possibly orthodox social and religious views that kept the man from smoking the cigars, as well as his ruthless ability to direct the gratifications of people useful to him. What vices would such a man have?
Manish couldn’t, or wouldn’t, tell me about the vices of this customer, but he had much to say about his other clients. His job, in many ways, was to assuage the insecurities of his rich customers, and he described them to me with anthropological pleasure. There were tycoons who would bargain furiously with him, asking for a 10 per cent discount; there were others who had temporary cash-flow problems and required credit; there were Sikhs who needed their cigars to be smuggled to them so that they would not be seen to be breaking a religious taboo; there were people who asked after their friends, also clients of Manish’s, and then dismissed them as charlatans, dissemblers and criminals; there were men who talked about their marital and sexual problems; and there were those who wanted the handsome young Manish’s approval of the hot mistress or prostitute they had acquired. Like a therapist at a private session, Manish listened to them all, taking care never to smoke cigars in public places so that his clients wouldn’t feel he was competing with them.

‘They’re loud and brash because they don’t know how much money they’ve made,’ he said. ‘They don’t know who they are.’ These were men whose self-control was a thin veneer, Manish said. ‘You see such a man walk in aggressively and loudly, look flustered when he realizes that he has to go through a second door to reach the temperature-controlled section, and who closes the second door much too loudly when he finally goes in.’

A man in his late twenties came into the store, dressed American-style in wrap-around sunglasses, shorts and big white sneakers. Manish immediately became polite and deferential.

‘I’ll come back later,’ the customer said, ‘but can I take one of these matchboxes?’

‘Of course, of course,’ Manish said. ‘Take a few,’ he said, scooping them out of the tray and pressing them into the customer’s hand.

‘What’s his background?’ I asked after the customer had left.

‘Family money,’ Manish said with a touch of derision.

‘How do you know?’

‘Look at the clothes he was wearing. Too old to be in college but not smart enough to be in university. Doesn’t need to go to work, so he can wander around in shorts on a weekday afternoon.’
Underneath Manish’s smooth, solicitous manner, there was a resentment about the men he dealt with. He himself had struggled to get to where he was now, but he still had far less money than his clients. We stepped out of the shop and began walking through the complex as Manish told me the story of how he had entered the cigar business. He had wanted to be a pilot, and in order to pursue this objective he had enrolled in a flying school in Kansas. Like many Indians of his class and background, he had noticed almost nothing about America except its business opportunities and what had seemed to him to be an orderly and regulated public life. He had held numerous odd jobs, including at a nightclub, where he observed, with some perplexity, the popularity of cigars. When he came back to India with his pilot’s licence, he apparently couldn’t find a job. Manish’s mother had a shop – this very one – selling imported artificial flowers, and Manish took it over. By his own account, he was drifting and unhappy. He was very close to his mother, with whom he still lived, but estranged from his father, who had been in the air force. Manish began thinking of selling cigars, and so he approached the man who was the only cigar importer in India. This man was much older than Manish and the cigars were simply a sideshow for him. His main business since the sixties had been as an arms dealer.

Manish entered into an uneasy partnership with the arms dealer, who agreed to supply him with cigars for a very high share of the profits. In 2000, Manish opened what he described as ‘the first cigar lounge in India’. It was at the Park Royal in Nehru Place, the hotel that Arindam used for his company’s events and to which I would return in a few days to attend a leadership session conducted by Arindam. But as Manish started doing well in the cigar business, his partner began demanding an even bigger share of the profits. When Manish tried to talk to him about this, he threatened to cut off the supply.

The problem with cigars, Manish said, was that they were a controlled luxury commodity. The arms dealer had moved into importing cigars because he was already importing weapons. ‘There is a strong relation between the two,’ Manish said, and in fact, when I met Manish again a couple of years later, he himself had expanded
The Great Gatsby: A Rich Man in India

into the ‘security’ business. The fact that rich Indians could afford to smoke Cuban cigars, Manish said, depended on the political situation in Cuba. ‘One hundred and sixty million cigars a year, that’s it, that’s all they produce,’ he said. ‘But there’s been an El Tardes office in Florida for ten years, ready to swing into action when Castro dies.’ When that happened, he said, Americans would move into the Cuban cigar market and that would be the end of smoking Cohibas for many people elsewhere in the world.

When Manish’s relationship with the arms dealer broke down, he became desperate. He no longer had access to cigars and began calling exporters all over the world to arrange for a fresh source of supply. All the men he contacted refused to do business with him. They were already represented by the arms dealer in India and had no reason to enter into new arrangements with an unknown young man. Manish had very little money and just a couple more numbers to call, one of them belonging to a sheikh in Bahrain. He decided to meet directly with the man. He bought a ticket with the last of his money, flew to Bahrain and met with the sheikh. When the sheikh heard Manish’s story, he was so amused that he agreed to supply him with cigars, even giving him credit at the beginning.

It was the kind of striving that Manish couldn’t find among his customers. I got the sense that in his mind they were like the arms dealer, coasting along, building on a success that had been present in their lives from the very beginning. They were brash and vulgar on the surface, and cheap and insecure underneath.

‘There is a certain kind of man who will walk in and say, “Show me the most expensive cigar you have,”’ Manish said when we returned to his store. ‘And what I will do right away is relieve the pressure that such a man obviously feels. I’ll say, “Don’t even go for this one.” As soon as I say that and make it seem that the best cigar is not necessarily the most expensive one, he feels released from the need to spend as much money as possible in order to assert himself. I listen to this man and talk to him for a while and then he’ll tell me what he really wants. “Forget it, yaar,” he’ll say. “I’m going to a party and I just want a long cigar that I can show everyone.”’

‘So what do you do when he says this?’ I asked Manish.
‘I tell him that he can buy a seven-inch cigar for fourteen hundred rupees, but he can also buy another seven-inch cigar for four hundred rupees. He’ll happily take the cheaper one. Size is all that matters.’

One evening in September, I went back to the Royal Ballroom auditorium of the Park Royal Hotel to hear Arindam speak. I had heard him address a crowd before, but that had been a familiar audience, made up of graduating students herded into a hotel auditorium near the Satbari campus. The students had seemed awestruck but were also restless, their attention wandering whenever the talk veered away from the question of their future to trickle-down theory, no doubt because they were more concerned with trickle-up. Arindam hectored them a little, and he had been worried enough about this to send me a text message a few hours later, asking me to ‘discount some of the harsh words I said to students’.

The event at the Royal Ballroom was different. It was the final performance in a day-long ‘leadership’ seminar for which people had paid 4,000 rupees each, the previous speakers having included Arindam’s wife, A. Sandip and other IIPM professors and Planman employees. Over a hundred people, quite a few women among them, sat under the chandeliers as a laptop was set up on the stage. They looked aspirational rather than polished corporate types, the men with red sacred threads around their wrists, the women in saris and salwar kameezes, a gathering of middle-class, middle-rung, white-collar individuals whose interest in leadership skills had a rather dutiful air to it. After a number of children – it was unclear to whom they belonged – had clustered around Arindam to get copies of the all-time best-seller Count Your Chickens Before They Hatch signed, Arindam went up on to the stage. He was wearing a shiny black corduroy suit, the jacket displaying embroidery on the shoulders, and loafers that seemed to be made of snakeskin.

Arindam wasn’t a natural speaker. In prolonged one-to-one conversations, he had the tendency to look away, not meeting the
listener’s gaze. This wasn’t quite such a problem in a public gathering, but he also had a high-pitched voice and a tendency to fumble his lines at the beginning. He started that evening by asking people what leadership meant to them. As his listeners spewed out their answers, using phrases (‘dream believer’, ‘reaching the objective’, ‘making decisions’, ‘simplifying things’) that seemed to have been lifted from some ur-text of self-help and management, they seemed both eager and slightly combative, as if they were not entirely convinced of his ability to teach them about leadership. ‘Here’s the great Arindam Chaudhuri,’ a man next to me muttered, using ‘great’ in the Indian way to mean someone fraudulent. Arindam seemed aware of the hostility. His responses were rather hesitant and his English sounded uncertain and pronouncedly Delhi middle class in its inflection.

As the session went on, however, it became evident that these qualities weren’t drawbacks, not among the people he was addressing. The mannerisms gave Arindam an everyday appeal, and it was the juxtaposition of this homeliness with his wealth, success and glamour that created a hold over the leadership aspirants in the audience. By themselves, the Bentley Continental, the ponytail and the designer glasses, or the familiar way Arindam had of dropping names like Harvard, McKinsey and Lee Iacocca, would have made him much too remote. But the glamour was irresistible when combined with his middlebrow characteristics. He was one of the audience, even if he represented the final stage in the evolution of the petite bourgeoisie.

From the way Arindam played on the sensibilities of his audience throughout the evening, he was well aware of this. If he wasn’t a natural speaker, he nevertheless had that ability of performers to gather strength the longer they stay up on the stage. His energy was unflagging, as I discovered in my first interview, which had gone on for five hours. And after about thirty minutes into the leadership session, as I began to be drawn into his patter, I felt that Arindam was telling the rising Indian middle class a story about itself, offering them an answer to the question of who they were. ‘I am trying to be a mirror,’ he said, a comment remarkably insightful in the way he represented a larger-than-life version of the people in the audience.
The Beautiful and the Damned

His listeners had come to the session with a rough sense of who they were supposed to be. They received feedback about this from the culture at large, from the proliferating media outlets that obsessed about them as members of ‘India Shining’ (the phrase coined by the BJP government in 2004 to describe the new India), and they were characterized in a similar manner by the West. They knew that as middle-class, well-to-do Indians, they were supposed to be modern and managerial. They were characterized as a people devoted to efficiency, given to the making of money and the enjoyment of consumer goods while retaining a touch of traditional spice, which meant that they did things like use the Internet to arrange marriages along caste and class lines.

Still, they needed reaffirmation of the role they were playing, and this is what Arindam provided, distilling down for them that cocktail of spurious tradition and manufactured modernity, and adding his signature flavour to the combination. He told his listeners stories about travelling to America, Europe and Japan. These, after all, were the nodes of the modern world, places that middle-class India was emulating and suddenly found within its reach. Yet the modern world was also remote; not many of the people in the audience had been there, and even if they had gone to these places, they would not have encountered them with any degree of intimacy. The very sites they were most drawn to – the business centres, the shopping plazas, the franchise restaurants, the tourist spots and the airports – would appear slightly illusory, never really experienced in spite of the photographs taken, the souvenirs bought and the money spent.

In the Royal Ballroom, though, these places were rendered anecdotally and brought down to the same plane as the India the audience knew – or the India they thought they knew. So there were jokes about national stereotypes, comments about the different strengths and weaknesses of the Americans, the Japanese, the French and the Indians. There were no individuals in these stories, merely nameless businessmen being met by Arindam in anonymous boardrooms, and the world itself seemed no more than a string of Royal Ballrooms, each dominated by a different ethnic group of capitalists.

After Arindam had given the audience this touch of the foreign,
he came home to more familiar territory, turning to the established prejudices of his audience. He made fun of regional Indian identities, something done more easily in a largely Hindi-speaking, Delhi crowd that tended to see itself as national. He pandered to their middle-class prejudices, attacking the government as inefficient and corrupt, but he also satisfied their nationalism by praising the Indian Army as the most efficient and disciplined wing of the state.

As Arindam became more comfortable, he started slipping into Hindi, segueing into the story of the Mahabharata as a way of approaching his ‘Theory of Management’ concept of leadership. Like many contemporary Hindus who have tried to cut out of their sprawling range of beliefs the hard lines of a modern faith, Arindam wasn’t interested in the complex ethical questions or sophisticated narrative strategies of the Mahabharata. Instead, his focus was on the Bhagavadgita, originally not much more than a long episode in the Mahabharata where Arjuna, wracked by doubt on the eve of going into battle against friends and family, is given a speech on duty by the god Krishna.

The Gita emerged as a foundational religious text only in modern times, when Hindu revivalists reeling from colonialism sought something more definitive than the amorphous set of practices and ideas that had characterized Vedic religion until then. It received a new life again in the early nineties when the Indian elites simultaneously embraced free-market economics and a hardened Hindu chauvinism. They discovered in the Gita an old, civilizational argument for maintaining the contemporary hierarchies of caste, wealth and power, while in the story of Arjuna throwing aside his moral dilemmas and entering wholeheartedly into the slaughter of the battlefield, they read an endorsement of a militant, aggressive Hinduism that did not shirk from violence, especially against minorities and the poor. Given this appeal of the book among the Indian middle and upper classes, Arindam’s use of it was a canny choice. He was extending into the realm of management theory a story that his audiences would be both familiar with and respectful towards, so that to challenge Arindam’s ideas would be tantamount to questioning a sacred text.

Arindam began the elaboration of his theories, naturally enough,
by pulling a red Gita out of a pocket. A Planman photographer ran forward frantically to capture the moment and, for the first time in the session, the audience began scribbling notes. Arindam turned to the laptop as if he was going to boot Krishna and Arjuna into existence, but the laptop refused to cooperate. As one, two, three and then four people gathered around the laptop, trying unsuccessfully to get it to display slides, Arindam gave up, turned away from the computer, and faced the audience.

Recovering rapidly from the technological failure, he began a performance that was part television soap and part stand-up comedy, hamming the roles of housewives, husbands returned from work, fathers and babies, management trainees and their bosses, the audience bursting into laughter as each little cameo was played out. The laptop had been finally made to work, and on the screen floated a matrix of different character types Arindam had extracted from Hindu scriptures. There was the tamas or pleasure-loving type, who could be led only by domination; the rajas, ambitious but greedy, who needed a combination of encouragement and control; and the satvic, who was brilliant and talented and needed to be left alone.

‘Leadership is about changing your colours like a chameleon to suit the situation,’ Arindam said, citing Krishna, the androgynous, slippery god, as the role model for the ideal CEO. Labourers or blue-collar workers were tamasic, young management trainees rajasic and highly skilled professionals like research scientists were satvic. He had reinvented the caste system in two hours.

Arindam finished to all-round applause, and as he came down the stage, he was mobbed by his listeners. I went outside to the passageway, where tamasic workers in overalls were rapidly installing gates decorated with marigold garlands for a wedding reception that would take place later in the evening. I sat on one of the couches, next to a middle-aged, dishevelled-looking man in a suit who was holding a plastic shopping bag that said ‘More Word Power’.

He had attended the entire day’s session, and when I asked him what he had thought of it, he said that it had been interesting. Some of the earlier speakers had been good and he had been especially impressed by A. Sandip.
'And what did you think of Arindam Chaudhuri’s talk?’ I asked.
‘Rubbish. It made no sense at all,’ he said. He fell silent, avoiding
my gaze, and when he looked at me again, it was with embarrassment. ‘You are a friend? You work for the company?’ He cheered up
as soon as he found out that I was writing about Arindam. ‘The man
is a fraud,’ he said, ‘but a very successful one.’

He was a small publisher who churned out language education
books. He would be releasing a management book during the World
Book Fair in Delhi in February, a work written by a Canadian living
in Beijing. ‘It is mostly China-focused. You are aware that there is
great interest in China these days? So I wanted to have an event like
this for the Canadian during the book fair, and I decided to come and
see this. You are writing about Arindam Chaudhuri?’ He handed me
his business card, leaned towards me, chuckled and said, ‘You must
find out how he makes his money.’

Arindam had told me a story about his childhood that involved a
strike at his father’s management school in Gurgaon. He described
the strikers as ‘rowdy elements’, students who had failed their courses
and objected to the academic discipline imposed on them. The strike
climaxed in a telephone call late one night to his father. An anonymous
man, speaking hurriedly, said that a student had been stabbed
on campus. Arindam’s father took a taxi, accompanied by one of his
employees, a canteen manager. Around 200 metres from the campus,
he saw a group of students, armed with iron rods, waiting for him.
He asked the driver to turn around, came home and took his family
to a hotel. The stabbing had been a ruse to bring him to the campus,
and even the canteen manager accompanying him had been part of
the conspiracy.

The strike continued for four months. When the Chaudhuri family
eventually moved back from the hotel to their home, they were
greeted by protesting students. ‘They were carrying horrible plac-
ards calling us thieves and murderers,’ Arindam said. ‘The neighbours,
who talked to the students, began calling my father “Bada Chor” (“Big Thief”) and me “Chota Chor” (“Little Thief”).’ But what was most distressing about the incident, Arindam said, was that they eventually discovered that members of the faculty were behind the strike, inciting the students. ‘All the people we trusted were involved, and I decided that I would not let this happen ever again.’

It was a touching story, a young boy seeing his father threatened by enemies and deciding to take them on. ‘My father named me Arindam,’ the grown-up man in front of me said. ‘That means “destroyer of enemies”.’ Since he had been named a decade and a half before the incident, Arindam’s father had either possessed a remarkably clear ability to foresee the future or a pronounced sense of enemies lurking everywhere. But the enemies, whether those drifting through Arindam’s father’s mind or the people I had been told about, were abstractions. The rowdy students, the traitorous canteen manager and the conspiratorial faculty members had no discernible motives in the story Arindam told me. They were there mostly to provide an opposition so that Arindam could have a motive for his success. They were also present to demonstrate a lesson about how people couldn’t be trusted. It was as if Arindam was explaining to me why his business was so close-knit; why outsiders were viewed with suspicion by people in his organization; why his public relations person had demanded, unsuccessfully, that I show him everything I wrote; and why this same person refused to respond to the most elementary queries about the company’s business practices or its revenues. There was more than the usual organizational secrecy at work here. Instead, a fundamental vision of life was involved, and underneath all the expansive theories of management with solutions for every problem in existence, below all the chatter of a world brought closer by corporate globalization, there was, ultimately, only this Manichean idea of people divided into the loyal and the disloyal, of Arindam at odds with the rest of the world.

This sense of tribalism had become especially pronounced after Arindam became successful. He had started, he said, by competing with the ‘mafia’ of management education in the country, but he provoked them beyond endurance by beginning a media division.
‘The elite now saw that I was challenging them directly, in the realm of ideas.’ He was no longer operating merely within the confines of business schools but in society as a whole, breaking down ‘the establishment hold on thought’. Arindam’s voice dropped low. ‘That is the reason why I am hated by a lot of people.’

He had a specific incident in mind that involved a harsh piece about his institute by a woman who was an alumna of the elite IIM Ahmedabad business school. ‘It was the world’s most stupid article,’ Arindam said, adding that he couldn’t remember the name of the journalist. The article, which came out a couple of years earlier, was commented upon and linked to by a blogger, who was then sent a letter by Arindam’s legal department, objecting to his characterization of the institute. ‘We had no clue on what is the blogger world,’ Arindam said. He found out soon enough, as other bloggers retaliated. Their attacks were picked up by the mainstream media, including a magazine called Businessworld. The war between Arindam and the establishment intellectuals was out in the open.

Because much of the skirmishing against Arindam took place on the Web, it is relatively easy, if somewhat overwhelming, to find out what the bloggers and other critics had to say. The journalist whose name Arindam couldn’t remember was Rashmi Bansal. She had written the original offending article ‘The Truth Behind IIPM’s Tall Claims’ in JAM (Just Another Magazine), a small periodical that she published herself and that was targeted at a youthful, English-speaking crowd. Her article said that IIPM’s advertising was misleading: only the Delhi campus had the facilities prominently displayed in the pictures (from swimming pool to library), and the campuses in other cities were housed in crowded office buildings; the scholars from institutions like Wharton, NYU, Columbia and Harvard claimed as ‘visiting faculty’ were people who had just passed through, delivering one-off lectures; the degrees IIPM awarded were not recognized by the Indian government; the company fudged data from media surveys to claim top rankings; and contrary to its claims, it had not placed its students in multinational concerns like McKinsey.

These allegations led to a sudden scrutiny of IIPM. Businessworld, where Bansal was a columnist, reported that it had accepted Arindam’s
request to look fairly into the case for and against his institute, but was fobbed off with generalities about IIPM and its enemies when it asked for specific information. As a result, the article in Businessworld ‘When the Chickens Come Home …’, while more moderate in tone than Bansal’s piece, was sceptical of the claims made, especially the details about the placement of IIPM students and the consultancy work done by Planman. Most of the multinational corporations named in IIPM advertisements, when contacted by Businessworld, said that they had few, if any, dealings with Arindam’s organization.

Planman struck back in curious ways. A reporter writing about the controversy in the news magazine Outlook noted that the IIPM website brandished supportive quotes from ‘luminaries like Noam Chomsky, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, and Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer’, but that ‘these reactions vanished within days of being posted on the Web’. The students at IIPM threatened to make a bonfire out of the IBM laptops they used because Gaurav Sabnis, the blogger who had linked to the offending piece by Bansal, worked at IBM. Sabnis announced his resignation from IBM, claiming that he was doing so voluntarily, in order to spare his employers embarrassment. His fellow bloggers, however, felt that he and his company had been pressured by IIPM – which, after all, was an important client of IBM’s. In the minds of the bloggers, Sabnis was a martyr to truth and freedom of expression, and so they went about the task of challenging IIPM’s claims with even greater energy, discovering, among other things, that IIPM’s campuses in Antwerp and Brussels had no more than a loose affiliation with a rather questionable institute that was not recognized by the Belgian government.

In sifting through the long, labyrinthine posts on the anti-Arindam blogs, it is hard to avoid the impression of a virtual world being hammered at by virtual tools. Most often, the claims made by IIPM and Planman had depended on no more than a careful selection of pictures, comments and data, and the creation of numerous websites. This approach had worked well because it was part of a larger narrative of corporate success in India. Most mainstream journalists were too lazy and untrained, and too enamoured of wealth, to subject these claims to the most basic scrutiny. But this was not true of the
bloggers, who revealed an unflagging ability to probe the Web, sending out emails to people listed by IIPM as contacts, checking IP addresses, and conducting background research. The most interesting investigation the bloggers carried out involved IIPM’s history, focusing not merely on the qualifications of Arindam and his faculty but also on the credentials of Arindam’s father, the man who had started it all by beginning a management school in the then rural surroundings of Gurgaon.

In *The Great Gatsby*, there are two questions asked of the central character. Where did Gatsby get his money from? And where did he go to college? These are necessary questions in a Gilded Age, in a time when money is being made too fast and in too many ways for established social networks to keep track of all upwardly mobile individuals. For those on the move, this gap between old networks and the rapidly changing times can become an opportunity, and this is what Gatsby tries to cash in on. He hopes he can make good the promise of capitalism: that ambitious, driven people can have second acts to their lives. So when Gatsby tells people, in a voice inflected by British affectations (‘old sport’), that he went to Oxford, he is trying to transform his new money, procured by questionable means, into old money. And because his assuming the persona of a blue-blooded heir leads naturally to questions about why he hasn’t attended one of the Ivy League colleges where wealthy young men like Tom Buchanan are sent to receive a final polish, he comes up with Oxford as his alma mater, a place so far away that it is difficult for people to check up on him.

Arindam, unlike Gatsby, wasn’t a working-class upstart from the interior of the country. He was a middle-class man who had grown up in Delhi, alert from the very beginning to the opportunities provided by the capital city, and who thus demonstrated that even the mobility provided by the new India is significantly more limited than what might have been possible in America at the turn of the new century. As for the degrees claimed by Arindam, they came not from some exotic overseas institution but from the business school set up by his father. But the question of pedigree, the bloggers realized, could be transferred back one generation, to Arindam’s father, to ‘Dr’
Malay Chaudhuri and his claim to have a doctorate from the Berlin School of Economics.

The bloggers discovered that it was hard to pinpoint any such school with certainty. Dr Chaudhuri had once contested elections to the Indian parliament – he received so few votes that he lost his deposit – and in his application to the Election Commission, he credited his doctorate to an institute in the other Berlin, in the former East Germany. What records could one possibly access when the country itself no longer existed? The bloggers concluded that there had never, in all likelihood, been a Berlin School of Economics and that Malay Chaudhuri’s doctorate was simply the first of many fictitious degrees handed out by the Chaudhuri clan and their business.

I could see the rationale of the bloggers. In spite of the friendliness with which Arindam treated me, he gave the impression of being on guard when it came to certain details. There were all those unanswered questions about revenues and the size of the company, made even more interesting because I discovered that it was under investigation by the Indian tax authorities. Although Arindam’s company had spent 31.6 crore rupees on advertising in 2006, it had paid no income tax that year or the previous year. There was also the company’s social responsibility campaign, directed through its charitable Great Indian Dream Foundation. Arindam claimed that it was building schools in slums and villages, setting up a hospital in a rural area of West Bengal and giving ‘experimental’ seeds to farmers. ‘We will have fifty-two schools in seven metros by the end of the year. Sixty thousand villages will be covered in the future. Eventually, I hope to fulfil my father’s dream of doing something for the downtrodden in Africa.’ Underneath the glittering capitalist, there was a closet radical, someone who admired Che Guevara so much that he had named his only son Che. But I found it impossible to verify any of these claims, and Arindam’s promise to take me to a school for the poor in a Delhi slum never materialized.

There were other things that remained beyond my scrutiny. When I stopped to think about it, I had met Arindam only in hotels and at the main IIPM campus in Satbari, where he had talked, in expansive terms, of expanding to America. ‘Let Harvard fume, “We are two
The Great Gatsby: A Rich Man in India

hundred years old,”’ Arindam had said, lopping a century and a half off Harvard’s past. ‘Eventually they will recognize how good we are.’ It was astonishing, this idea of America, through Harvard, as the old, while the India he represented was the new – younger and more modern by far than America. And perhaps he was right. His institute was a fluid, virtual business school of the future, one that had done away with the arduous task of institution building.

The school’s first campus had been in Gurgaon. Arindam had then moved it to the Qutab Institutional Area, on the southern fringe of Delhi, operating from a leased building that finally fell foul of the city’s zoning laws. Now they were operating from Satbari, somewhere between Gurgaon and Qutab, but even this building, its bright colours and abstract designs done to Arindam’s specifications, its small gym and swimming pool throwing out a challenge to the well-funded IIMs, might not be the final stop. It was a leased space, and Arindam told me that negotiations were already in progress to set the campus up somewhere else.

If the school was mobile, Arindam was even more so. I had wanted to meet him in his office. ‘I don’t really operate from a fixed space,’ he said. ‘I am so much on the move.’ One day in September, he sent me a text message at 7 a.m. ‘Good morning!’ it said. ‘Totally totally forgot that day. However in the airport right now. And free. Can call. Do let me know if you’ve woken up! Sorry about this early morning missive!’

I called him back hurriedly, trying not to sound sleepy. Arindam was attending a film festival in Toronto, where one of his films, The Last Lear, was being screened. During the stopover in London, he would be joined on the plane by the stars of his film, the young actress Preity Zinta and the bearded superstar Amitabh Bachchan, who has gone from playing thin angry young men in the seventies to corporate patriarchs in the new millennium. After attending the festival in Toronto, Arindam would stop in at his London office for a couple of days.

I remembered reading an article in the Financial Times where he had said that he would be opening his London institute at Chancery Lane, and so I asked him, ‘Where exactly is your London office?’
There was a pause. ‘That’s a good question,’ he said. ‘Where is it?’

He sounded boyish and vulnerable, and I found myself wanting to respond kindly, as if speaking to a child I didn’t want to embarrass about an insignificant lie. ‘It’s hard for you to keep track of all the offices you have,’ I suggested.

‘That’s right,’ he said, apparently relieved that I had offered him a way out.

I had once asked Arindam about the criticism that his institute didn’t really offer careers. It was undoubtedly successful in attracting students, but the students, on graduating, seemed to end up mostly in the very organization that had given them their expensive degrees, teaching at the institute and working for Planman as its managers. Arindam’s response was that his organization was a ‘family’, one that offered a continuation of the camaraderie experienced by the students. He also pointed out that, unlike the IIMs, he was not using public money to produce a small number of MBAs who then received extravagant salaries from multinational corporations. ‘They’ve cornered hundred-acre campuses in India. The six IIMs, taken together, teach a thousand students. And because they have so few students, the average pay package is eight to nine lakhs. That is aura! Wow!’

He was right in pointing out how higher education for the Indian elite, from the engineering colleges like the Indian Institutes of Technology to the IIM business schools, was being funded by the state, producing technocrats and corporate executives who then went on to attack the state for being inefficient and wasteful. ‘Every American president should start by thanking the Indian taxpayer,’ he said, noting that it was US multinationals that benefited most from the training given to IIT and IIM graduates. By contrast, Arindam said, he had privatized management education, applying to it the genuine rules of the marketplace. His graduates might get smaller starting salaries. They might be working, he said sarcastically, for distinctly unglamorous companies like ‘Raju Underwear’ and ‘Relaxo Hawaii Chappals’, but they were not coasting on the taxpayer’s money. He was training many more MBAs, people who would work in Indian organizations that needed their skills. ‘Our placements are improving. Foreign companies are also coming,’ he added defensively.
The bulk of IIPM students still ended up working for Arindam. It was hard to get an answer to how much they were paid when they joined him, but I had a rough idea because Arindam had, in a different context, divided his organization’s salary structure into three groups; those getting up to 25,000 rupees a month, those getting up to 75,000 rupees a month, and those making more than 75,000 rupees a month. It seemed reasonable to assume that a starting IIPM graduate was in the first category; at 25,000 rupees a month or 3 lakhs a year, they were pulling in a third of an IIM graduate, which doesn’t seem bad. But this is also just double the amount a call centre worker with a basic – and cheap – college degree could earn, although the managerial work presumably offers more upward mobility and better hours than a call centre job.

Yet the problem with Arindam’s approach lay deeper than the salaries his graduates made. Even in the world of closed Indian companies, Arindam’s organization is unusual. It is not publicly traded, and it was incorporated only very recently. The success and failure of IIPM students depends largely upon what happens to Planman, and what happens to Planman depends on what happens to Arindam. As for what happens to Arindam, that depends on whether the students keep coming. If the business school produces the greater part of the company’s revenues and employs most of the graduating students, this model can keep functioning only as long as there is a growing body of students willing to put up substantial sums of money for their degrees, at which point the whole thing starts looking like a pyramid scheme.

But even though the bloggers were right in much of their criticism, they seemed unable to comprehend that the questionable practices of IIPM and Planman were an expression of the times, and that Arindam wasn’t so much a rogue management guru as a particularly blatant manifestation of the management principle of making money. For all of Arindam’s tendency to evade questions about his business
by referring to the elite IIM mafia, it was true that the initial criticism had been started by Bansal, an IIM Ahmedabad graduate and then picked up by Sabnis, who had studied at IIM Lucknow. It was equally true that there was a marked element of snobbery in the remarks of the bloggers. Along with the more substantive criticism of IIPM and Planman, there were many comments on the way Arindam and his acolytes dressed and spoke, with an element of resentment and surprise that such pretenders could claim to belong to the corporate world that most of the bloggers came from.

None of the bloggers seemed willing to consider that the corporate practices they cherished necessarily spawned imitators. IIPM had the same relationship to IIM as knock-off goods do to branded products, which is to say that there is always a market for the knock-off version among the aspirational crowds. In other ways too, the cult represented by Arindam – and the bloggers were puzzled by the vehemence by which IIPM students, the people apparently being defrauded, defended him – was only part of the larger cult that was India Shining.

Arindam’s management factory produced something less tangible but more resonant than durables or consumer products. It took people who aspired and had a fair bit of money but little cultural or intellectual capital and promised to turn them into fully fledged partners of the corporate globalized world. The students at IIPM were not from impoverished backgrounds. They couldn’t have been, since the courses were expensive. Many came from provincial towns, from small business families that had accumulated wealth and were canny traders and now felt the need to upgrade themselves so that they could compete in the realm of globalization. Arindam gave youth from these backgrounds a chance to tap away at IBM laptops, wear shiny suits and polished shoes, and go on foreign trips to Geneva or New York. All this involved a considerable degree of play-acting, and the students spent the most impressionable years of their lives in what was in essence a toy management school – mini golf course, mini gym, mini library – but play-acting was what most of the Indian middle and upper classes were doing anyway, wandering about the malls checking out Tommy Hilfiger and Louis Vuitton.
There was an occasion when I saw the overlap between the pretenders and the legitimate management schools on proud display. One morning, I dropped in at Taj Palace Hotel, walking past the smiling women at the front desk to the venue where the Indian Chamber of Commerce was holding a marketing conference. I was there to hear a talk on ‘luxury brands’ in India by Vijay Mallya, a liquor baron, an airline owner and one of the wealthiest individuals in the world. Mallya was also a nominated member of parliament, and when he arrived at the Taj Palace Hotel, he came with gun-toting government bodyguards in tow. A crowd of photographers and cameramen followed him, trying desperately to record every facial crease and every sparkle of his diamond earrings as he walked to the stage.

Mallya had a pale, fleshy face with a salt-and-pepper goatee, and his hair was rakishly long at the back. He was a portly man, handsome in a grizzled lion sort of way, keenly aware that his status in that gathering was something close to royalty. When a panellist asked him to share his ‘wisdom’ with the crowd, he began a rambling speech that contained words shouted out very loudly, which, when I looked at my notebook later that day, seemed to come to this:


After the speech was over, Mallya offered more nuggets of his philosophy in response to questions from the floor. When he was flattered by the questioners, as was often the case, he was pleased but slightly bored. When he really liked a question, he sounded kingly as he responded, ‘There is merit in your comments.’ He remained prickly and nervous throughout the questions, however, his left leg furiously working an invisible foot pedal, and he became flushed like a watermelon when a female member of the audience asked him why his companies objectified women with their pin-up calendars and risqué advertisements.
As the questions went on, however, I realized that the corporate individuals among the questioners were heavily outnumbered by management students and faculty members, each of whom turned to the audience to announce the institute with which he or she was affiliated before asking the question. Here were the aspirers again, rubbing shoulders with wealth and power, their hopes visible in the style of asking the questions, which involved blurting out the question and turning away from Mallya before quite finishing, looking sideways at a companion with a smile of triumph, and then sitting down and disappearing from the scene as if they had never even been born to trouble the world with their dreams.

There were no IIPM students in the crowd, and yet it was the same phenomenon at work, of young men and women raised to believe that somewhere up there in the hallowed corporate corridors existed all the wisdom and fruits of modern life. Arindam offered his students proximity to this world by his own style and the take-them-on attitude he breathed. Joining IIPM, for which not much was required other than a high school degree and the ability to pay steep fees, they were suddenly up to par with the nobility of the globalized world. IIM, Harvard, McKinsey: these were the names Arindam shouted out with familiarity the day he strode up and down the aisle while addressing a class of graduating students. And because the students, in spite of the money spent and the Executive Communication classes taken, still sported bad haircuts and wore awkward clothes, they appreciated the adversarial air projected by their honorary dean. They formed an army of Gatsbys, wanting not to overturn the social order but only to belong to the upper crust, which is why they felt compelled to defend Arindam and IIPM against the bloggers.

Arindam, I had been told at the very beginning of my encounter with him, was a man of the times. His flamboyance, his ambition, his moneymaking: if his lightning-rod persona made these aspects visible, it did so because these qualities already existed as charged
elements in the atmosphere of contemporary India. As I came to know him, though, I felt that there was another crucial aspect in which he was a representative of the times. His fortune, ultimately, was built on the aspiration and ressentiment of the Indian middle class. Without the aspirers looking up, emulating, admiring and parting with their cash, moguls like Arindam would not exist. He had made a business out of their aspirations, calibrating the brashness and insecurity that had come to them on the wings of the market economy and its political partner, right-wing Hinduism. Arindam understood well how these aspirers had been given a language of assertion by the times they lived in, and how they had also been handed a vocabulary of rage that is quite disproportionate to their perceived provocations. It is one of the triumphs of our age that aspirers can be made to feel both empowered and excluded, and that all over the world, one sees a new lumpenbourgeoisie quick to express a sense of victimization, voicing their anger about being excluded from the elite while being callously indifferent to the truly impoverished.

I had begun feeling some of this aspiration myself. I remember one particular afternoon when I had lunch with a former IIPM student who was also one of Arindam’s prized employees. His name was Siddharth Nambiar, but apart from the common first name, there was nothing about him that suggested he was a doppelgänger come to reveal my secret life to me. Wearing a suit and designer sunglasses, his head shaved, he appeared in front of me with long strides, car keys dangling from his right hand. He was late because he had rammed his car into the back of a bus, but he was unfazed by this ‘fender bender’, as he put it.

We were meeting at a shopping plaza just across the street from where I lived at the time, an odd mix of multinational franchises and run-down shops that was especially popular with young people who worked at call centres. Nambiar led me up the stairs to an Italian restaurant called Azzuro. It was quite empty: the call centre workers preferred the kathi roll stand around the corner or the T.G.I. Friday’s outlet across the square, and it was too early for the Western expats and upper-class Indians who liked the place.
Nambiar was a regular at Azzuro. The waiters knew him, as did the woman who ran the restaurant. He took off his sunglasses, ordered with a flourish and began telling me about his career with Planman. He had been a student at IIPM Delhi, joined the company on graduating and been put in charge of the media division almost immediately. He was twenty-three years old. Sutanu, whom I had met at the very beginning of my involvement with Arindam, was junior to him in the hierarchy of the company.

Arindam had put considerable thought into sending Nambiar to meet me. If his primary business was churning out management graduates, he had sent me his finest product, glistening and confident, someone who could compete effortlessly with the MBAs from IIM. Nambiar’s shaven head shone in the bright afternoon light coming in through the windows as he spoke about how he had negotiated with *Foreign Affairs* about bringing out an Indian edition (and although the effort had been unsuccessful, he had apparently impressed *Foreign Affairs* with his presentation, according to a friend who worked there). He didn’t know much about the content of the publication and didn’t think journalism was very interesting, but he liked marketing. He had travelled around the world with Arindam, and in a few weeks he would be leaving for Oxford, where he would do an MBA. When he returned, he expected to work at Planman again.

I asked him about Arindam’s conspicuous consumption, and he was delighted to give me the details. ‘The car?’ he said. ‘It’s a Bentley Continental four-door. Actually, he got it because of me. We were in London, near Lincoln’s Inn Fields, and I saw a Bentley parked outside this restaurant where I was having lunch with friends. I had one of them take a picture of me leaning on the hood of the Bentley with a glass of champagne in my hand.’ He laughed, waiting for the image to be fully processed in my brain. ‘It looked so cool, you know? Then I went to see Arindam at the Ritz, where he was staying. I was showing someone else the picture on my laptop, and he grabbed the laptop from me, looked at the picture, and said, “What kind of car is that? I’m going to get one.”’

Arindam had another Bentley in Bombay, as well as a Jaguar
Sovereign. His wife, Rajita, drove a Porsche. Arindam’s mobile phone, a birthday gift from his wife, was a Vertu.

‘You don’t know what a Vertu is? Look it up on the Web,’ Nambiar said encouragingly.

I asked him if he could describe Arindam’s office for me.

‘Let me think,’ he said. ‘I’d say it has a nightclub in the daytime look.’

We laughed at this. Nambiar’s laughter had a double edge to it, containing the knowledge that he himself was too sophisticated to make such a mistake but also revealing his admiration for a man who had the money to flaunt his taste, no matter how questionable. He described for me the main chamber that had a fluorescent red leather couch curving around the wall, the shelves filled with management books and magazines. There was an anteroom to one side, containing a treadmill, a television and a pull-out sofa where Arindam’s son, Che, sometimes slept in the afternoon. The office floor had blue granite tiling, and the building itself had tinted blue glass. From the windows of Arindam’s office, Nambiar said, it was possible to see the Ernst & Young building on the left.

It sounded quite recognizably like Arindam’s office, and very much like his house, which had been written up in the pages of the Hindustan Times a few weeks earlier:

No wonder, then, that from wall colours to concealed lights and from artefacts to Swarovski crystals, everything is blue in the Chaudhuri residence. While Renaissance paintings adorn the walls, a sparkly floor stone in dark blue is quite a novelty … The Chaudhuri residence may not have 132 rooms like the White House, but within its own confines, it is a reflection of identities both homely and attractive, modern and trendy.

What gave Nambiar’s description a touch of virtual reality was the fact that Arindam’s office no longer existed. It had been closed down for violating zoning laws and survived only in the images created so expertly by Nambiar.

When I asked for the bill, the waiter said that it had already been taken care of by the manager.

‘She’s my girlfriend’s mother,’ Nambiar said.
'That's really too bad, because I was hoping to treat you.'

I told the waiter to bring me the bill, insisting that I would pay for lunch.

The waiter smiled and disappeared, while Nambiar looked surprised. I said something about journalistic ethics, but I could see that this made no sense to him. I was beginning to lose my temper, and I wondered why I was losing my temper. Who would really care if I let Nambiar’s girlfriend’s mother pay for lunch? Who would think that my honesty as a writer had been compromised because of this? Yet as I cornered the waiter again and forced him to bring the bill, I felt that I was beginning to lose my own self in this world of appearances and aspirations and that paying the bill was the only way I could return to steady ground.

After Nambiar had left, I walked around the shopping complex for a while. I came often enough to the shopping complex, sometimes with my two-year-old son. There was a group of street children who hung out near the fountain choked with rubbish, one of them a girl of ten or eleven with a baby in her arms. There were other forms of life surviving in the cracks of the marketplace, like the puppies that lived with their mother between the fountain and the cigarette shop and were given scraps of food by the vendors and security guards. My son was especially fond of the puppies, and a vendor asked me why I didn’t just take one home. ‘It’ll make your son happy,’ he said. ‘And at least one of these dogs will get a good life.’

But I didn’t think of any of this then. I thought instead of Nambiar’s confidence, and looked at myself in a shop window. I wondered why I didn’t have a suit, designer sunglasses and car keys. I wondered why I wasn’t making money at this time in India when moneymaking opportunities seemed to be everywhere for the asking. I was an aspirer, finally, oblivious to anything but my own inchoate desires, filled with a sense of victimization as well as a trembling awareness of opportunities that it was perhaps not too late to capitalize on. ‘I don’t like an image of me that isn’t me,’ Arindam had told me early on, anxious to clarify his essential self. And here was I, not liking the image of me that was me.

These thoughts stayed with me as I walked back home, but eventually they gave way to other considerations. I often wondered, in
the years that followed, if the papers would some day carry the news that Arindam’s empire had collapsed. Until that moment came, though – if it ever did – the advertisements would keep appearing, offering a background rhythm as I made my way into other lives and other stories. When I saw those advertisements, I would peer closely at Arindam’s face, as opaque and unfathomable as ever, and I would wonder whether I had ever known the man at all.