



India on a growth curve

By JANE MILBURN

RURAL India determines the outcome of elections which means political leaders play to rural constituents, in contrast to Australia where the reverse is true and influence lies in cities and towns in which 90 per cent of Australians live.

In India, 50 per cent of employment is in agriculture and there is strong interest in improving agricultural productivity to enable the world's second-fastest growing economy to remain self sufficient in its food production.

Although the contrasts between rural Australia and India are significant, the Australian Rural Leadership Programme's recent study tour was impressed to visit small plots of land growing up to seven layers of food crops without using pesticides.

The non-pesticide management techniques include the use of potions of chilli, garlic, tobacco and cow urine, as well as neem, marigolds, bird perches, bonfires, light and pheromone traps – similar to what we refer to as biodynamic farming.

More than 80 per cent of Indian farmers have less than 2ha and only 1 per cent of farms are more than 10ha, with the ideal operational holding being 5-8ha.

One view from the subcontinent was that climate change along with erratic fuel prices will inevitably return agriculture to centre stage of the world economy because food is a life essential.

Another view was that at a time when many nations are queuing up to be friends with India, the recent racial attacks in Australia are sucking energy out of the building of bilateral arrangements and giving our country a bad name in India.

The ARLP group had a safe and insightful experience during our visit to Hyderabad, Delhi and Agra, but Australian High Commissioner Peter Verghese said that until the situation in Australia changed, it was not a good climate for building relationships.

Mr Verghese said India's economy was growing at a rapid clip of more than 10 per cent each year and there were significant Australian trade opportunities in resources although less so in food.

While India imports Australian pulses, edible oils and prime hard wheat, agricultural access is limited to niche products and filling supply/demand shortfalls.

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On the other hand, India has a strong interest in improving its agricultural productivity and there is keen interest in Australia's rural and regional development knowledge, and value-added technology.

India is looking for scientific, management and logistic improvements, and new and renewable energy opportunities – for example solar energy for cold storage could stem the 30 per cent wastage in the supply chain.

With a trillion dollar economy, India is home to 1.2 billion people of whom 403 million have mobile phones and there are more TVs than toilets. Two-thirds of the population is under 35 years of age.

There was a great sense of con-

nectedness between people – no more evident than on the roads where despite the constantly beeping chaotic interfacians, bikes, tuk-tuks, cars and buses, we witnessed no major binges.

We saw affirmative action reaching into villages where self-help groups have been enabling women during the past decade to step outside their homes and develop micro-businesses to lift their families out of poverty.

It was heartening to see women being empowered in this way but saddening to learn that the money they generate often goes towards the purchase of land, which only men can own, or to dowries for the men who marry their daughters.

Nonetheless, India is a place where women are accepted as leaders with politician Dr Jayaprakash (JP) Narayan of the Lok Satta party telling us that in contested political positions, the women always win.

JP identified value-added agriculture as having great potential to salvage the 20-30 per cent post-harvest wastage and horrendous price fluctuations, and India could harness this technology from Australia which he said is very good at value-adding.

In India, everything you say could be true and untrue, and JP said that at its core there was 5000 years of history, every conceivable religion and a diversity that was incredible.

There is now, JP believes, an exceptional chance to transform India while economic growth is in its favour and the key to his agenda is empowering citizens by giving them the tools to overcome poverty.

We met another exemplar agent of change, Kiran Bedi, a former high-ranking female police officer



Top: Jane Milburn with women in a local village near Hyderabad. Above: Jane Milburn, Indian bride and groom, and Garry Salliba.

who is working to empower the poor through a foundation whose seeds were sown from her innovative crime prevention work.

Dr Bedi heads the Navyoti India Foundation, which is a product of her positive attitude and her belief in clear, visible justice for all based on doing the right thing and doing your best.

Her wisdom: "Literally, here and now, you need to be a traffic manager in your mind. If a negative thought comes, there is no room for it." And this: "I ask myself, how I can do better than yesterday by improving myself rather than thinking how I can defeat other people."

She said leadership requires three things: engagement or proactive reaching out; education

by working together and mentoring one-to-one; and an equal system working in partnership.

So we came away knowing India is not just the Taj Mahal, it is the values you hold and the embrace of difference. And that in business, Indians like to cut to the chase, do the deal, and work out the details later.

Our visit coincided with the wedding season and the generosity of spirit extended to welcoming three complete strangers into the heart of an Indian wedding in Delhi. Ask yourself, in reverse, would we be so gracious and welcoming?

— Jane Milburn is on an Australian Rural Leadership Programme sponsored by Rural Press Ltd.