

*December 24, 2006*

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## **You too. Happy New Year**

**R**ecently, a few of us in Washington DC who write for papers in the sub-continent got a call inviting us for lunch at the State Department. Unlike our-baap sarkaar, Uncle Sam is tight-fisted in these matters. Free lunches are rare, and usually we hacks pick up the tab. So we trickled into the Harry S. Truman Building, as the State Department edifice is formally called, a little nonplussed about the sudden largesse.

Lunch was in a private dining room on the eighth floor, a rarified section where Americans host visiting dignitaries and jaw-jaw on weighty world issues. The reception rooms here are rich with American lore and artifacts -- George Washington's china, Jefferson's maps etc. The scuttlebutt is that when the hosts lower the boom on foreign visitors (like when they are told they'll be bombed back to Stone Age), they are brought here for a tour to soothe their nerves. Incidentally, when the complex was built in the 1930s it was meant to house the War Department.

But neither threats not blandishments awaited us. Instead, we were quizzed gently, thoughtfully, on current world affairs, including on Afghanistan and Iraq. What could the U.S do better to gain respect? Where are U.S-India ties headed? We proffered our pearls of wisdom over coffee and dessert, and as our host paid for the lunch with his credit card (MEA, note), a thought occurred. That was a lunch I was eating on your behalf.

2006 has been the year India has truly stepped on to the world stage. It has been happening for some time now, but one gets the sense this is the inflexion point. It's the year when the India-Pakistan hyphenation was buried under an India-China equation and Asia seemed to matter more than Europe. It's also the year when the line between the Indian immigrant and Indian native blurred. You, the peripatetic Indian, is also the diaspora, just as the diaspora is native.

The India story is evident in the sudden access Indians find across the world. Suddenly everyone wants to hear you and speak to you. Earlier this year, President Bush gave an interview to the Times of India and a Hindi daily. Top U.S officials reach out to explain not just the nuke deal, but various aspects of U.S policy. Even Indian defence officials say they get unprecedented access at the Pentagon, and that's not just to sell jets and tanks. There isn't a corporate door here that doesn't open for an Indian businessman. And we are not hesitating walking through.

Much of the activity is happening below the radar. For me, two small business deals illustrated the story more than any big-ticket item. Last month, the Hyderabad-based Gitanjali Gems bought a family-owned 91-store American chain called Samuels Jewelers. Last week, the Pune-based RSB Group bought a family-owned Michigan firm called Miller Brothers that makes brake rotors, differential gears, and other machined parts. Such buyouts are happening with increasing frequency.

We tend to poomphet a lot about the achievements of the Indian diaspora and the high-tech crowd. But India's growth is also about the nuts-and-bolts company, and you coming of age. Yes, you. Not Time magazine's wired man-of-the-year "You," but the regular, unwired you -- you who fought through neck deep water to get to work, you who endured torturous and toxic traffic to get to college, you who studied through power outage and bedlam outside to make the grade. The rise of India is your story too.

So thanks for the lunch. And a happy new year, you.