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New Age guru peps up India story believers

NOTES & MUSINGS | Chaitanya Kalbag
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Meeting old expectations

"When you were five years old, you were happy nearly all the time. Somebody had to make you unhappy. Now you are 30-plus and have achieved your dreams, and you are unhappy all the time. Somebody has to make you happy."

Delegates at the India Economic Summit laughed nervously. There was a good dose of "interiority" and "well-being" in New Age guru Jaggi Vasudev's talk, but that was about the only time the networking classes paused to draw breath - literally, with their palms upward on their laps - during two and a half days of confabulation.

There were 720 delegates at this year's World Economic Forum event in New Delhi, and the largest contingent yet of overseas company chief executive officers, a sign that the world is really taking India seriously. Although there was a lot of talk about supply-chain efficiency, the coming retail revolution, and rural development, there was also hand-wringing about the slowness of change.

As is usual at these annual talk-fests, panellists spoke passionately about a host of subjects ranging from "The Opportunities of Smart Growth" to "Can India run without water?" The risks to India's success are clear. Loss of freshwater resources, oil price peaks, the wrong sort of globalisation, climate change, and HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis - and the challenge of demographics. (Sonia Gandhi put it succinctly: "While the world faces old-age problems, India faces age-old problems.") Equally clear are the exciting changes under way, from the reforms on in Bihar to the dramatic empowerment of women and children in bonded labour in Tamil Nadu.

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