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Business development takes lawyer to a changing India

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Returning to India, the land of his father and mother, for the first time in more than 10 years, Chicago lawyer Neville M. Bilimoria was shocked in many ways.

"Stepping off the plane in Mumbai [formerly Bombay], it hits you like a brick," he said. "The smell, the taste, the heat reminds you right away that you are no longer in the United States but in a third-world country.

"The stench of the airport reminds me of my youth and my prior visits to India," he said.

But this time was very different.

India's booming economy is often thought of by Chicago lawyers in the context of law firms outsourcing functions to India, such as call centers or data processing.

But Bilimoria said he went to India for a different reason, "to wave the Duane Morris flag" and drum up business.

He said many of his own clients and clients of fellow lawyers at his firm "want to do business in India."

India seeks \$1.5 trillion in American investment in the next five years to sustain its boom, Bilimoria said he learned at a major economic conference in Delhi.

So visible along with the beggars at his car window and the barefoot women and naked children, Bilimoria related, were the shocks of economic progress.

"You could tell India is booming by looking at the mobile phone ads," he enthused, "the billboards for clothing, and the plethora of cars on the roads.

"There are fewer cows in Mumbai on the roads than there used to be. There is no room for cows anymore because they have been driven from the city streets to make way" for cars, Bilimoria said.

He said he learned from Sam Pitroda, chairman and CEO of WorldTel Ltd., a telecommunications giant, that India has 6 million new telephones. Every month.

According to India's Central Statistical Organization, the nation's gross domestic product in 2005 and 2006 grew 8.5 percent, the second-fastest rate of growth among the world's 20 largest economies.

In an effort to take advantage of this, Bilimoria, 36, will be named chair of Duane Morris' new India Practice Group, accord-

ing to his firm.

During his two-week trip to India this month, Bilimoria "discussed the possibility of setting up different types of corporations for our clients, whether they be hotels, casinos, different types of services lines. I also met with the growing pharmaceutical industry."

India hopes to become a global player in generic drugs, a business that is among Bilimoria's practice areas.

According to his law firm, he counsels pharmaceutical companies, hospitals, managed care organizations and doctors on corporate, regulatory and litigation matters.

India didn't have casinos in the past, Bilimoria said, but the first seven casino licenses were recently granted for the city of Goa. Some of his firm's clients are interested.

"We also discussed business with a number of law firms, for example, that have a need for U.S. counsel" for patent and real estate disputes in the United States, he continued, disputes that involve Indian entrepreneurs and Indian companies.

Part of Bilimoria's wonder at the growth comes from the fact that his father, Maherji N. Bilimoria, "went from utter poverty, sometimes having no food on his plate" in India, to becoming an engineer in the U.S. for General Electric and a professor at Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management.

His father came to America on a scholarship in 1964 and eventually ended up running GE's Hotpoint plant in Cicero when it had 14,000 workers, Bilimoria said.

His father is from a poor town in India known as Bilimora, his own name minus one letter. His mother, Bachi, is from Surat, India.

"I have always felt privileged to have been born in the U.S. and to experience the prosperity and opportunity available to all Americans," Bilimoria said.

In his "expedition" to India, he said he was reminded also of the serious pitfalls there, namely "the bureaucracy, the lack of infrastructure," and problems in the government.

"Sometimes the mass of government personnel can be shocking to Westerners," he said. An excessive number of officials have to be dealt with and many permits

must be obtained in order to do business.

Moreover, he said, there is still a lackadaisical attitude in the bureaucracy and "corruption in government is still present, to my dismay."

Also, India has a "noticeable Communist Party that vacillates from fostering" economic progress to blocking it "to meet its own political agendas."

India will have to overcome the communists' influence to succeed, he said.

Contrasts abounded. Extraordinary poverty persists along with the boom, and "one out of every 11 children in India will not live past the age of five."

Through privatization, he said, India now has a dozen airlines when only two were available a few years ago, and more air travel is available between cities.

But there is a noticeable shortage of runways in Delhi, and this is typical of India's lack of infrastructure, Bilimoria said.

Moreover, he said, the population of the Mumbai metropolitan area was 12 million when he was last there more than 10 years ago, and it is now 17 million.

"India needs more space in its cities, more buildings, more offices, better roads, better technological infrastructure," he said.

On the positive side, according to Bilimoria, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh "has pledged to allow foreign investment" especially U.S. investment.

And among the growing population of educated young people there are "the new captains of Indian industry."

These young workers plus the growth of new businesses and influx of foreign investors are pressures that could bring an end to corruption, he said.

"I met with many Indian lawyers and law firms ... most of whom were excited about the progress, but all of whom recognized the lack of favorable laws to foster economic growth. The government ... is slowly letting go of its socialist mores ... taking steps to reform its bureaucratic delays."

He added, "I hope, along with the Indian Diaspora, that the economic progress in India will not be fleeting...."

"The Times of India calls 2007 'The Year of India.' After my visit, I can see why."