This Property Is Condemned

Mukesh Amdani’s house in India

by Theodore Dalrymple

I wouldn’t recognize stock manipulation or accountancy fraud at its most blatant, but it doesn’t surprise me when others discover it. After murder, fraud was one of the first crimes committed by mankind. Jacob indulged it with the help of his mother, and his long-term reputation did not suffer from it.

Fraud is a subject of never-ending fascination, though a painful one for those who lose by it. So long as men engage in economic activity, they—some of them, at least—will practice fraud. One even admires them a little, certainly by comparison with those who have timidly led a blameless life and who, in the words of Dylan Thomas' threnody for his father, "have forked no lightning." This is unjust, for there is often more heroism in a life of quiet decency than in one of flamboyant deeds; but our minds are like those of bower birds, attracted to the bright, shiny, meretricious, and sensational.

I am agnostic as to whether the $100 billion loss of value sustained in the past few days by Gautam Adani's companies in India is (as the Bible might put it) the wages of fraud: He denies any wrongdoing, though evidently he is not believed.

My knowledge of the Indian rich is very limited. The nearest I came to meeting any of them was fifty years ago, during what was called the Licence Raj, when a relatively few chosen businessmen were awarded concessions that gave them a monopoly of the production or sale of commodities (it sometimes seems as if that is a model we are increasingly emulating in the West). It was virtually a license for their owners to print money.

I was invited to the garden party of a Licence Raj tycoon in Delhi. He showed us round his garden and was particularly proud of his ornamental wheat. Ornamental wheat, in a country in which so many were hungry if not actually starving! But, in a way, he was right: Looked at in this way, wheat is a beautiful plant.

After the tour of his garden, we sat under a silken canopy drinking chilled wine of high quality (or so it seemed to me, but I was no judge, the astonishing thing being at the time that he was able to lay his hands on such foreign luxuries at all). Then he clapped his hands, not making much noise because his hands were rather chubby. He must have been closely

watched, however, for out of the bushes suddenly emerged a host of servants bearing trays of the most delicious food on their heads—he was a vegetarian. This, I thought then, is the way to live, though I have never figured out in all the subsequent years how to attain such a way of life. I assumed that the Licence Raj magnate was corrupt, but outwardly he was most respectable.

No doubt the Indian rich have changed since the end of the Licence Ray, and economic prowess has become more important relative to political connection than it then was.

The downfall—the relative downfall—of Mr. Adani leaves Mukesh Amdani the richest man in India, and one of the richest men in the world. I know nothing of his business affairs; the only thing I know about him is the "palace" that he built himself in Bombay, at a cost (so it is said) between $1 and $2 billion. The result is hideous beyond description, though no one can deny its scale.

Mr. Amdani made the mistake of employing eminent Western architects, with the natural consequence that the resulting building is about as warm and inviting as a snake pit. It would be an excellent exercise for architectural students to build something uglier for the money. *That*, at least, would take real imagination.

To say that the building is indiscreet is to put it very mildly. If I were extremely rich in a country in which many millions were still grindingly poor, I should be careful and hesitant about displaying my wealth. I would certainly not let it be known that my house had a car park for 168 cars. Surely this ostentation infuriates the poor.

Perhaps, though, I have the psychology of poverty wrong, at least in certain cultural circumstances. Perhaps the flaunting of such wealth impresses rather than infuriates. Perhaps it demonstrates that the wealthy man has no complexes about his

wealth, and thereby does not consider it unjust. This is important, for if the wealthy man himself has no belief in the justice of his possession of great wealth, which he indicates by discretion that is akin to furtiveness, then he communicates his bad conscience to the poor, who are therefore more likely to protect or rebel.

The Amdani house is of great significance, not only for India, but for the world. Here is hideousness that cannot be attributed to poverty or lack of resources. A wonder of the world (in the positive sense) could have been built for what it cost. Instead, something that only added to the sum total of ugliness in the world was constructed at pharaonic expense. Nor could this be attributed simply to the patron's lack of taste: He employed eminent Western architects, after all, and there is little reason to suppose that other vastly rich men, from anywhere in the world, or other architects, would have built something much better, only something marginally less bad.

One of the justifications of great wealth and the inequality necessary for it to be possessed is that it can be used to adorn the world, to the benefit of everyone including future generations. This is something to which people at a more basic economic level cannot easily aspire.

The question, then, is: Why is it that in our age, everywhere in the world, the very rich are incapable of adorning the world, unless it be by preservation of the monuments of the past? The artists and architects who serve them cannot do it either. If beauty is one of the proper goals of life (the others being truth and goodness), humanity has lost its way—at least in this respect.

First published in *Taki's magazine*.