

# My Reflections - 2023-24

*Mumbai | 29/01/2024*

The turn of the year, the scent of opportunity, and the palpable whisper of promise in the air— there's a certain magical allure this year. And yet, some things don't change. Like our ability to stay true to our new year resolutions, beyond the fourth week of January!

Even as our personal routines might circle back to where they were in December, the world is moving inexorably forward. Each day, we are stepping into a story that's never been told before. It's this journey into the unexpected that fuels real progress. In the face of the unknown, we are tested, and find our greatest strengths. This is a world where one needs to mix hindsight, insight, and foresight to gain 'better-sight'.

2023 has been a year of many milestones for Aditya Birla Group. Our Group's market cap grew 40% over the previous year to around US\$90Bn, our scale manufacturing businesses consolidated their leadership positions, and our consumer businesses are on the brink of transformational growth. And with the launch of two new and large businesses in 2024, we are constructing a growth platform with a unique mix of strength and scope.

Amidst these milestones, I found myself revisiting a letter penned by my great grandfather, Mr. GD Birla, 50 years ago. A testament to enduring values, in a changing world. His words, written at a time when the world, and India, were very different, echo through the decades.

*"How does one judge a Company?"*

*Do the criteria depend solely on its profitability, its production figures, market share and product ratings? Or is there some other aspect one must consider as well – some deeper, warmer, more human aspect?*

*We have always believed there is.*

*We have always believed that what really matters is how much the Company cares. How socially involved it is. To what extent it is concerned about improving the quality of life of the people around it – not just its own employees, mind you, but all the members of the community it lives in."*

*- GD Birla, Letter to Shareholders, Grasim Annual Report 1973*

He wrote this decades before terms like CSR and stakeholder capitalism gained currency. And the sentiment echoed here has since guided our group's ethos and actions.

We often tend to view the world through the lens of live events, and that lens can be distorting. However, when viewed through the clarifying perspective of the longer arc of time, it is remarkable how certain core values endure.

Four years into the 2020s, we have seen a global pandemic, war, unprecedented tech acceleration, and a reshuffle of the global pecking order. A lot of established ideas are being challenged, but nations, companies and people have demonstrated incredible resilience. **The secret to navigating this chaos, and moving forward with purpose, perhaps lies in embracing the ideas and values which have permanence and enduring relevance.** My great grandfather's vision, transcending time, urges us to look beyond the ephemeral, to what truly counts – the lasting impact we leave behind.

In 2023, we had the opportunity to host our annual ABG Awards in Atlanta. During the ABG Awards each year, the best talent from across our companies, and across the world, is recognised. This platform has been for us, a multi-decadal celebration of excellence and its 25th anniversary called for a fitting stage. And what better place than Atlanta, which houses two of our global businesses, and is a symbol of our global reach and commitment to fostering a community of diverse talents and ideas.

The 1500 odd attendees included Indians and Americans, Koreans and Germans, Australians and Brazilians, among others. Interacting with all of them, I was struck by the **remarkable and yet underestimated ability of a global corporation to bring people together**. A global community tied together by a common vision and a collective purpose.

In a world where geopolitics, ideologies, and national identities increasingly polarise and divide, global corporations like ours, have the unique potential to bridge these divides through their transnational operations, cultural exchanges, and the common platforms they provide for people around the world. And therefore, they have a powerful ability to unite people.

A chance assembly of a group of scientists at Google hailing from Germany, India, Poland, Britain, Canada, Ukraine, and US, paved the way for the current transformation in GenAI. In the melding of global minds, the language of innovation finds its true voice.

And so, despite its many epitaphs, globalisation still has a powerful role to play. Turns out that it's not just capital and commodities crossing borders – globalisation also, unexpectedly, forges friendships. My visit to Atlanta offered a prime example. I met Lionel, a chatty

chauffeur from Alabama who became an impromptu friend. Our interaction took a serendipitous turn when Lionel revealed his deep interest in our global expansion plans. His curiosity stemmed from his Alabama roots, particularly because Novelis was constructing an aluminium rolling mill there – the first such, of this scale, in the US in 40 years. This multi-billion dollar investment is not just a significant step in our global journey but also for him a symbol of job creation and prosperity in his hometown. Lionel's enthusiasm for our project was more than evident. It was personal. He was genuinely moved that a company of Indian origin was creating economic impact in his community, that would transcend generations.

In this exchange, what I realised was, **globalisation in its authentic form doesn't have to be a zero-sum game.** And the model of globalisation that will always work is one that is founded on openness, mutual trust, and transparency.

Lionel's appreciation though came with a caveat: a diligent oversight of the project's timeline. He assured he would report directly to me should any notable delays in the commissioning process arise!

Lionel's interest and excitement about an Indian MNC was a companion sentiment of the growing sense of confidence I see among Indians.

Over the last twelve months, our space programme took humanity to the far side of the moon for the first time. Sheetal Devi's gold at the Asian Para Games, Nikhat Zareen's spirited defence of her world championship title in boxing, and Rohan Bopanna's age-defying grand slam triumph make us start to collectively dream of more sporting glory.

Over 45,000 people experienced the Atal Setu in Mumbai on the first day after it was opened, relishing the graceful decks vaulting over the seaway as harbingers of a world of better infrastructure. An estimated 300Mn people travelled for domestic vacations in 2023, while air travel reached an all-time high of 150Mn+. I was one of millions of Indians who undertook a journey of discovery within India, with trips to Puri and Rameswaram in 2023.

As large pockets of the world remain engulfed in pessimism, India seems to stride forward with unwavering optimism. This is the dynamism and energy of a young country and ancient civilization that has found its voice and footing.

There is a palpable sense that the country is on the move. India is awash with optimism, pride, and anticipation. This anticipation stems from our country's accelerated high-growth trajectory. And for that, our government deserves much credit.

The viral meme 'just looking like a wow' echoes the vibrant energy of the Indian economy and captures the unparalleled nature of this moment. In the arc of a nation's progress there comes a moment when you feel a certain pulse. A deeply impactful one - the pulse of a nation's confidence. Perhaps it's time to imagine an index that captures the collective confidence of a nation. Maybe call it, the **national confidence index!**

After all, the surging confidence of over a billion plus people, in a nation that's on the move, can be a transformative force!

And may that force be with us!

- Kumar Mangalam Birla