

## The Argumentative Indian

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Western culture is predominant in the modern world. Culture taken in the extended sense of involving politics, economics, philosophy and science. One of the explanations for this is the recent colonial rule of the European powers and its subsequent extension by other means. This is obviously a dissatisfactory state of affairs and thus a wide-spread need to distance yourself from the hegemony of western modern viewpoints, and to champion alternate views of the world. In this analysis opposite camps seem to find a common ground of dispute, the western imperialists, say represented by the phobic views of a Samuel Huntington championing the crusades of the West against the backwards barbarism of the East: as well as sectarian advocates of post-colonial dominions, resenting external influences. The analysis is deeply flawed according to Sen. What is universally valid in Western culture is not endemic to the West and thus there is no need to reject it. In particular India has long been hailed as the worlds largest functioning democracy, but this tradition of democracy is not, unlike the Indian railway system, a legacy of the British, it has deeper roots in India, going back in time further than democracy in the West.

Hinduism is a case in point. It is often grossly misrepresented in the West, as well as by recent revivalists in India (Hindutva). The West sees it as a quaint system of Gods, a relic from pre-history, of arcane rituals and spurious wisdom of exotic, if ephemeral charm; while Indian revivalists see it as a manifestation of the true destiny of India with a literal interpretation of the divine nature of mythological figures, often accompanied with a wishfully distorted history, so often connected with nationalistic renewal. Hinduism is many things, it involves religion of course, as well as mythology, both being merged in a way which is hard to subsequently set asunder. But Hinduism also contains in itself many other traditions, a philosophy of scepticism probing into the nature of being. As such it antedates many things prominent in Greek western philosophy, such as the philosophical musings of a Parmenides. Hinduism, unlike its modern militant version, is basically a tolerant attitude to life, able to assume within itself not only rival religions, but also atheism per se<sup>1</sup>. With obvious pride the author reminds the reader that there is no more extensive literature on atheism and doubt in a religious perspective than there is in Sanskrit. The Indian legacy of treatises and tracts, narrations and myths, is incredibly rich. The epic Mahabharata in fact, still hugely popular with the Indian population, is eight times as long as the Odysseys and Illiad combined, and far longer than the Bible as well. Yet Macaulay famously dismissed the entire Oriental literary legacy as inferior to a single shelf of Western literature. And James Mill, the father of John Stuart Mill, wrote and subsequently published back in 1817 a very influential history of India, priding himself

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<sup>1</sup> Sens grandfather was a Hindu scholar, he urged his grandson to study Hinduism and come to a conclusion. The grandson tried and admitted failure saying that he could not believe in the gods. His grandfather simply diagnosed him as having chosen the atheist branch of Hinduism.

of never having gone there, nor knowing any of its languages. A piece of 'chutz-pah' that handsomely paid off to the author, but surely did much harm. Sen contrasts the haughty Mill with previous chroniclers of India, coming from the Mid-East several centuries before, travelling widely and learning local ways and tongues. Thus probing scepticism, surely a universal value, is no prerogative of the West but has been present elsewhere for at least as long, which is of course hardly surprising, universal human features you expect to arise spontaneously all around the world.

Thus Sen is engaged in fortifying the confidence of non-Westerners, especially Indians, in reminding them of their accomplishments in the past, and that the real valuable elements of Western thought and practice, also were prevalent indigenously, and thus in particular there is no reason to reject them. In particular, unfortunately without giving concrete examples beyond the universally known positional system, he reminds the reader that Indian mathematics was in the early centuries after Christ very sophisticated and spread to China as well as to the West via Arabic scholars. Still maybe the most influential legacy of the Indians was the Buddhist agnostic religion. For about a thousand years, championed by one of Sen's heroes - the emperor Ashoka commanding the greatest Indian empire on record, it was the dominant religion on the Indian subcontinent, replacing Hinduism out of which it had emerged. It spread to China and to the South East, going eventually all the way up to Korea and Japan. Buddhism was the major link between China and India throughout most of recorded history. Thus the inflated claims by modern Hindu revivalists that India has an unbroken Hindu tradition are proven to be absurd. Now Hinduism eventually reasserted itself but it was the encompassing tolerant kind which already had as it later also would accommodate a great variety of other religions. Jews had fled to India after the fall of Jerusalem, Christians arrived in the first centuries, so did Arab Muslim traders, and Zoroastrian Parsis fleeing an intolerant Persia found a sanctuary on the Indian subcontinent. Hinduism accepted as its own, the rival emergence of Jainism as well as the latter construction of Sikhism. Traditionally though the real conflict seems to have been with the Muslims. But even then, there was accommodation. True, Islam came to India in real terms in connection with subsequent waves of Muslim invaders, the last and most glorious being the Mughals. Hindi temples may have been looted and burned, but on the other hand, the Mughals with Babur took Hindi wives and assimilated themselves. Babur's grandson Akbar, is another of Sen's heroes, who called at the end of the first Muslim millennium, a conference of reconciliation with the object of getting to terms. Akbar also, admittedly with scant success, tried to form a new religion out of the different components of the prevailing one. Akbar's active tolerance is advantageously compared with the religious bigotry in Europe at the time, with Bruno burned on the stake and Galileo was threatened with the same fate.

Still relations between Muslims and Hindus are still tense with eruptions of communal violence occurring regularly. Muslims making up the single largest religious minority in India, and with the exception of Pakistan and Indonesia, no country houses more Muslims in absolute numbers than India, a fact of life Sen never tires to remind the reader of. What strikes an outsider is how Muslims can be integrated in the rigid caste system of India, after all caste would be anathema to Muslims and Christians. There are some explanations to this which one is able to, after some patience, to tease out of the relevant literature.

First in spite of striking differences, especially those of dress-code and dietary rules, there is a large confluence, Muslims taking part in Hindu festivals as well as conversely<sup>2</sup>. Thus the caste-system to some extent still survives in the Muslim population although naturally the Muslim converts are to be found among those of low caste or none at all. Now, Sen reminds us, the real reasons that Muslims and Hindus are at risk for communal violence is not primarily because of their religious affiliations, although those of course provide excellent excuses, but because of their vulnerability due to poverty. Such massacres typically take place in poor neighbourhoods where the victims are severely limited as to defensive resources. This points to another very important point Sen is making, a point with which I totally agree and which I find surprising not to be more oftenly made explicit, namely that there are so many ways in which to categorize people, and thus so many ways in which an identity maybe formed, religious affiliation and national citizenship not necessarily being the most natural, only so in very specific circumstances. After all you can be a man or woman (maybe the most divisive categorization there is), poor or rich, defined by your dietary habits, your intellectual interests, your taste in clothes and art, your political and philosophical views, your language, your relations, you name it. Each of those make sense in particular contexts and there is no overriding context at all, contrary to what certain movements, such as Hinduist revival, want to proclaim<sup>3</sup>.

The partition of India into Pakistan and India proper was an unfortunate and a wholly politically motivated decision that caused mayhem on a scale that was not appropriately appreciated by a war-weary outside world<sup>4</sup>. Its main architect the skinny lawyer Jinnah was by no means a devout Muslim, not in anyway comparable to say the present President

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<sup>2</sup> This cross-religious dressing is a very common phenomenon, any successful religion is forced to co-opt local practices, just as Catholicism incorporated many Pagan festivals, and the adoration of the Virgin Mary, as well as subsidiary exultation of a canopy of saints, is clearly a continuation of polytheism if by other means.

<sup>3</sup> This wealth of categories into which to shoehorn people also puts the issue of say racism in the right perspective. It is commonly hold that a statement that Blacks are inferior to Whites in intelligence is a racist claim. The motivations for such may very well be racist, but the claims as such maybe totally value neutral only reporting on a statistical fact (such as if you use the very dubious notion of IQ to have any bearing on intelligence). Anything that can be measured is bound to show statistical variations. The life-expectancy of women is higher than that of men, just as the physical strength of the latter is superior on the average. Such statements are not necessarily seen as 'racist' or rather 'sexist'. The essence of racism is not to denigrate a race, a race is just a conventional category, with little if any canonical biological foundation, but to judge an individual solely on his perceived membership in a certain category. You may hold that on the average the Black guy, as he may be defined, is inferior to the average White, but as long as that principled stand has little if any influence on the judgement of a particular individual you are, not in my opinion, a racist.

<sup>4</sup> The famines in Bengali a few years before independance did however cause even more suffering harvesting a couple of millions, and thus in scope comparable to the atrocities committed in war-time Europe, yet those tragedies are almost forgotten. To what extent they were masterminded by the British (as supposedly were the famines in the Ukraine were by Stalin) or simply neglected by them remains a contestious question that has never really been addressed. The world is weary and can only take in so much, there is the Holocaust, who wants to create another?

of India, and I believe he was even initially opposed to the idea of a separation. Now of course it is a matter of fact and it is interesting to compare the two parallel destinies of the countries. Indias constitution is a secular one, to the credit of the founders of Modern India, especially Gandhi and his disciple Nehru committed as they were to a non-sectarian and non-communal society. This becomes the more remarkable that Gandhi was a devout Hindu, more devoted to his religion than many frantic Hindu-nationalists of today. On the other hand Pakistan was founded on the idea of being a Holy state, one in which Islam would take pride of place, and of course its constitution is as far as it is possible an implementation of the laws of Quaran<sup>5</sup>. This may or may not have had an effect on the subsequent political development. While India has proved itself to be a resilient democracy, the latter has but served intermittently at the discretion of the military. Now one should be weary of postulating such causes and effects. It is true that a similar situation has characterized much of modern Turkey, which, however, is a secular state by constitution, while on the other hand in Iran a religious priesthood has been able to usurp the kind of authority which normally is associated with a strong military, a state-of-affairs which would have seem more to be expected in a state so committed to religious authority as ostensibly Pakistan. The perennial problem of political analysis in particular and social one in general, is the paucity of examples and the complexities of each, making facile generalizations as irrelevant as seductive. The fact remains that Pakistan has very much served the position of a junior partner suffering humiliation in its split up into its two connected components back in the fall of 1971<sup>6</sup>. And this leads up to perhaps the most well-argued and well-written essay by Sen in this collection, namely the one addressing the nuclear arms-race between the two countries.

There is a basic asymmetry in the modern world. There are the nuclear powers such as the US, Russia, China, and as an afterthought England and France which should be thought of as subservient to the US<sup>7</sup>. They thus, in virtue of their fire-power, occupy special positions, among those permanent seats in the security council, as well as taking the high-

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<sup>5</sup> This might strike Westerns observers as remarkable forgetting the strong impact on religion on the State that has characterized most Western countries. The idea of secularization only emerged from the underground of subversive thought during the Enlightenment becoming perhaps the proudest part of the American Constitution, and in such a liberal country like Sweden, until recently leaving the State Church was only permissible if it involved joining some other Christian sect (which might have been the understood meaning of freedom of religion as the freedom to chose your Christian persuasion of choice) and the Church and the State only separated in 2000 after decades of discussion. I must admit that I as an atheist still resented this split a little, being a testimony partly to the benign nature of the Lutheran Church as well as to its pervasive cultural influence. It is interesting to speculate that the intense Islamophobia experienced by a significant part of the western population is the possibility it provides of identification. Anybody with even a superficial acquaintedness with Christian self-righteousness and militant pietism can recognize the very same features in the sincerity of monotheistic fundamentalism, especially the deeper undercurrent that just as the most militant Christians may not be the most devout Christians the same goes for Islamic fundamentalism.

<sup>6</sup> While relations with the main component - West Pakistan, seem always to have been tense, this does not seem to be the case with its eastern component in spite of the same supposedly religious distinction.

<sup>7</sup> This might in particular anger the French, whose remaining claim to great power status rests entirely

minded attitude against nuclear proliferation. Sen can well understand the resentments of the Indians, yet becoming Nuclear in 1998 has paradoxically rather weakened India's position not only morally but also militarily. That India had nuclear capabilities became already manifest in the 70's, but India at that time was committed to non-proliferation and being a peaceful state. Now being perceived as capable of becoming nuclear, logically confers almost as much perceived deterrent power as being nuclear, as well as enhancing the moral standing by volitionally abstaining from taking the final step (unless forced?). Now the effectiveness of nuclear arms is based on the paradox of being more of a threat than a feasible weapon, hence something more loved by politicians than the military, the paradox consisting in that to work as a threat its use must not be ruled out of hand. The classical solution to this kind of Liars paradox dilemma is to commit yourself to a 'non first-use' yet the balance of terror, being the ultimate rationale of the weapon, is bound to be very unstable contingent upon both a trust in the rationality of your opponent tempered with an apprehension of his possible recklessness<sup>8</sup>. Sen is rather sceptical about the claim that the nuclear menace kept the Cold war from going Hot, believing that this was more of a happy coincidence than a foregone conclusion, citing in particular the brinkmanship Kennedy was contemplating during the Cuban Missile crisis. As Bertrand Russell so convincingly and typically argued, the number of nuclear conflicts increase quadratically with the number of nuclear powers. In the case of India and Pakistan, the Indian tests of 1998 made it legitimate for Pakistan, without any international censure, to perform their own, which they promptly did. The net effect is that India and Pakistan now enjoy ultimate parity, while before India enjoyed a great advantage in conventional strength which it now is barred from exploiting<sup>9</sup> Also India has suffered in moral standing and any hopes of securing a permanent seat on the security council have vanished<sup>10</sup>. True Indo-Pakistan relations seem to have enjoyed a thaw in the last five years or so, but that could be only temporary.

The social and economical inequities in India are truly appalling, on such a scale as almost to defy contemplation. Naturally most people, be they visitors or permanent residents striving for survival, avert their eyes. In fact there are of course many India's but in a very concrete way there are only two, of which the largest part is more or less totally marginalized, and with economic revival even more so. The India of international concern and economic development, the India with which foreigners deal and come into contact with, is but a minority of privilege, be it hard-earned and in many cases desperately held on to. Indians are among the most well-educated in the world as far as higher education is

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on its Nuclear capabilities recently (1996?) flaunted through a test in the French Polynesia. Yet of course the French and English Nuclear arsenals are not directed against each other nor to the US, while of course the Chinese and the Russians see any other nuclear power as a potential opponent. The split up of the former Sovietunion resulted suddenly in many nuclear independant states, but which did have the sense of relinquishing their arsenals.

<sup>8</sup> Illustrated by the 'If you can convince me that I cannot attack you I will not do so'

<sup>9</sup> This in particular inhibited its recent action against Pakistan in the Kashmir preventing it to employ effective measures which would have defeated the Pakistanis.

<sup>10</sup> In fact India became something of a Nuclear Pariah, but this seems to have significantly changed in the last month or so when writing this, the Indian P M Singh substituting 'Bush-bash' with 'Bush-gush' during in a recent visit to Washington.

concerned but the levels of literacy and nourishment compare even badly with that of sub-Saharan Africa!<sup>11</sup> As to nourishment the Indian Government has accumulated huge grain reserves yet they are committed not to use them? Why is that? Plain laziness and neglect or pure insanity? The explanation is that many measures intended to strengthen the needy only have resulted in the marginalization of even needier groups. Farmers are struggling and ought to receive more for the labours, thus the measures to artificially enhance prices. This of course hits against the neediest as well as proportionally benefitting the richer farmers unintentionally.

Indian society is not egalitarian, and that of course also applies to the relations between the sexes. To be poor is one thing, but to be a poor woman is even worse. Yet of course, the cruelties of economic inequality is of course far more decisive than mere sex. Women do play an important part in politics, and the symbolic fact that India, as opposed to the U.S. has had a female head of state in charge is pointedly referred to. As to subtle discrimination Sen points to the sex-ratios. Women are healthier than men on the average, a biologically established fact<sup>12</sup> so although there are always born more boys than girls, pretty soon there will be an excess of girls. But statistics do not bear this out, out of which one draws the conclusions that women are dying off at a far higher rate than should be statistically expected (using the Western world as supposedly unbiased controls), thus pointing to a silent 'Holocaust' the number of victims dwarfing the classical one<sup>13</sup>. On the other hand related to this is elective abortion on grounds of gender. Less female fetuses are allowed to complete their development than boys. As a consequence fewer girls are born than boys. Why is this so upsetting? On one hand if you are uncomfortable about abortion per se, the very frivolity of basing it on gender alone, is doubly offensive (and personally I would belong to this category); on the other hand if abortion is not an issue but seen as a normal way of controlling birth and the woman's own body, I fail to see the problem. For one thing, as Sen admits, the ones who are making the decisions are the women themselves<sup>14</sup>, and ultimately by restricting the number of women being born, population-growth will be inhibited and women will eventually become more valuable<sup>15</sup>. Then of course the impact of this policy is limited as it only involves a minority.

The problem of population control is another issue. This was very much on the minds of people in the 60's, than with the temporary relief of the Green Revolution and economic growth, people seem to have forgotten about it. At that time draconic measures

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<sup>11</sup> This goes particularly for the latter, a case that is among the most startling of the revelations in Sen's book. Sen remarks that famines do not occur in democracies, which I find a statistical fact of scant explanatory virtue. Is it because in a democracy it is not permitted? Is it why it was allowed to happen during the British rule? A famine is not the result of too little food, only of regional scarcity and logistics of distributions coupled with a cash-depleted population. The remedies involve organization and temporary enablement, challenges one would naively believe would be even easier to be met by a commanding authority than a splintered argumentatively challenged one.

<sup>12</sup> Supposedly related to the fact that they have two X-chromosomes not just one

<sup>13</sup> Sen was one of the first to publicly point this out

<sup>14</sup> This could of course also be seen as a manifestation of the desperate plight of women, on the other hand the procedures are only available to the well-to-do.

<sup>15</sup> this is a standard evolutionary argument based on dynamic stability for the balance of sex-ratios

were instigated in India (as well as starting in China) including coerced or deceitful sterilization. The success rate of those measures seems questionable. On the other hand in some model states - such as Kerala, with an emphasis on public education and health-care (surely the leading goals of any concerned social reformer) birth-rates have dipped drastically on a purely voluntary ground. Kerala is not a rich and prosperous state, showing that significant increases in the quality of human lives can be effected without enhancing consumerism, the latter being the orthodox economic conviction.

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