

Being Indian

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Is there such a thing as an Indian? A generic individual which represents all Indians? of course not, yet any kind of popular account of sociology is bound to simplify matters by endowing generalizations with some kind of substance, however spurious.

So what is Varma's thesis? Indians, in spite of their reputation for otherworldliness, are indeed extremely worldly and materialistic. No people are so bent upon getting ahead in the world, and to this ambition the hierarchical structure of Indian society is very conducive, as well as the basic facts that there are so many Indians, a veritable ocean of destitution, of which the average Indian on the make is callously indifferent, the rationale being that but for luck this is everyone's fate, and the presently unlucky would be just as indifferent would they being struck with luck themselves. Varma goes on to say that Indians are singularly amoral, what matters is the end not the means. What in other countries would generate righteous indignation, the Indians simply disregard, they have an understanding for the expediency to which success invariably owes its existence. As a further consequence of this we see the easy transferal of loyalties. The average Indian can indeed be quite obsequious and go to extremes to curry favours. But this is of course all in the nature of a game, the rationale of which is very transparent. Those who are powerful are in the position to deliver, and if they do not, devotion and loyalty will be withdrawn with no sentimental fuss. And it is according to this unabashed national scramble for money and status that explains the success of democracy, according to Varma, because unlike the more thoughtful and academic Sen, he has no truck with the idea that democracy in India is a natural extension of a long tradition of open debate and argumentation. Democracy is indeed a British legacy which the Indians have understood to turn to their advantage. Democracy with its market place of political aspirations and the corruptive powers which goes with them has simply been too attractive a scam to turn down. The views of Varma appear strikingly vulgar and offensive compared to the more reasoned and subtle ones of Sen, but because of their very vulgarity they seem somehow to strike closer to the truth. The main illusion of the educated and the intelligent is to assume that most of his fellow men entertain similar exalted ideas about learning and reasoning.

Now is Varma going on a limb soon to break? Obviously it would be stupid to argue that Indians are significantly different from other people, the very same features we discover in the Indians are of course also present in all kinds of people, but it maybe that the particular situation of being an Indian perched precariously on a raft adrift an ocean of misery into which drowning is a constant threat, does stimulate certain character traits. When Varma starts to discuss intrinsic mathematical aptitude he finds himself on thin ice, or at least it is easier for me to appreciate his actual predicament. He makes some rather feeble attempts at anchoring mathematical ability in the supposed Hindu tradition of categorizing things. When he speaks about the Galilean revolution he actually means the heliocentric idea and remarks that this was anticipated by the calculations of

far earlier Indian mathematicians and astronomers. Calculating what? Anyone who writes of 'number crunching' surely is a mathematical illiterate. Mathematical ability or not, in spite of the explosion of higher graduates in India (to the shameful detriment of primary education), he regrets that the creative spirit of those graduates is very low. Could it be that all this study and diligence only had one object, namely that of getting ahead, of getting material benefits and the status those endow, and not out of genuine curiosity? Could it be that the present IT revolution in India is a shame, rather than riding the crest, India is simply producing IT-coolies, able and willing to do the hard dirty work of routine programming for very modest awards? The author is almost miring himself in dejection when he suddenly recalls that those Indians who went West showed themselves exceptionally talented and creative, and that in fact the Indian community is the most financially successful in the States, every ten of them being a millionaire and also making out a substantial fraction of the medical profession.

And religion? Varma adheres to the general idea that India is basically a Hindu country. The Muslim minority is very much Hindutized and the commendable religious tolerance of the Hindu religion is simply due to the fact that Hinduism never felt threatened by external influences and hence never found any reason to oppose them, confident that it would eventually absorb them. And indeed Hinduism is remarkably resilient, maybe because it adheres so well to the human psyche, more so than the more demanding monotheistic religions. A religion of ritual and all too human deities, a religion focused on the everyday life being sensitive to the petty quotidian concerns, still large enough to encompass philosophical inquiry and even atheism.

And it is exactly this kind of resiliency that characterizes the Indian national in his ever-continuing struggle for survival, the live and let live attitude, the refusal to take no for an answer, the ability to bend rules and look for unorthodox solutions. Outright violence is quite unusual because everyone is aware of the web in which they are all connected and that anything that threatens to rupture it is bound to cause chaos, and that is something to be avoided at all costs. In fact India in its foreign policy has shown remarkable restraint. When beating Pakistan militarily it refused to exploit its advantages but magnanimously returned its spoils to its vanquished foe. When dealing with hickjackers they showed extreme caution and willingness to accommodate in order to save the hostages at considerable cost. Internally, instead of fighting secession movements, they tend to co-opt them, accommodating enough of their wishes to sap their enthusiasm, seducing them with the plenty open to those willing to cooperate.

Will the 21st century be Indias, as the cover acclaims, and if so why? That question is not properly answered, instead there are plenty of anecdotes of Indians doing good, and statistics to show how the section of consumers in the Indian economy is steadily increasing at the rate of adding an entire Australia every year.

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