

Aiding Self Knowledge

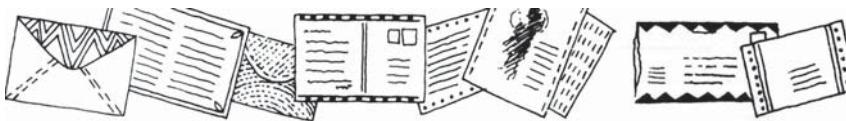
Please convey my sincere appreciation to the author of *Panchkanya* series. What an amount of hard research work he must have undertaken to produce such an in-depth study of renowned characters of our epics. The author is providing a valuable service for India's young generation are only too eager to know about the Western heritage and culture but ignore our own. Countries like Egypt, China, Israel Greek and Rome also have a rich cultural heritage and their citizens continue to be proud of it. These articles will certainly make our present generation help understand our civilisational values and hopefully make them proud of India's culture.

T.G.Krishnamurthy, Chennai

Plea for Simple Life

Though I agree with much of your analysis in "On the Plus Side" in the issue No. 143 that describes the positive achievements of the BJP era, I have some reservations about the overall worldview behind this analysis. For example, your statement, "It should not be forgotten that the NDA government was building more kilometers of road per day than previous regimes built in a year" is rather disturbing. In Andhra Pradesh, where I am working, I have seen too much being spent on highways and too many petrol stations being built, but comparatively nothing being put into rural infrastructure. I think this may have been one of the reasons Chandrababu Naidu lost the last election. His 'industrialisation' based on excessive borrowing from the World Bank and the IMF did not address the issues of farmers who were committing suicide.

Your observation regarding Arun Jaitley's positive role at the Cancun meet of the G20 alliance, "which made sure that the US and the European Union countries did not succeed in



Readers' Responses

ramming their interests down everybody else's throats" has its merits. But, as an organic agriculturist, I can only say that since India joined the WTO, small and medium farmers have suffered heavily as a result, particularly in South India. We just cannot compete with the rich farmers of the First World countries, not even with our own rich Indian farmers. So what good was the whole effort?

You write that today 65 percent of our people are engaged in agriculture and that this is a very inefficient way of organising an economy, since in the US and EU two to five percent of the population feeds not only the whole nation, but has plenty left over to export, and even to dump. The way those countries are treating their food and agricultural sector cannot and should not be a model for us. Their intensive use of chemicals, as well as their use of genetically modified crops, crop monocultures, and similar industrial and agricultural practices have a very negative impact on the health of their people as well as endangering bio-diversity. They protect their large farmers with phenomenal subsidies from their respective governments. At whose cost?

During the FEMATTAC (the European Women' section of the Anti-Economic Globalisation movement, (ATTAC) Conference in Graz, Austria in September 2003, I met and heard of many women farmers who were very unhappy with the

agricultural policies of the EU and the patriarchal nature of the Anti-Globalisation movement itself. The participants said they want to promote alternative, bio dynamic agriculture, in which the needs of humans, animals and nature are all taken seriously.

Agriculture can be industrialised and income generated from it, but it should be done in a human, not a purely commercialised way. We can start investing in agriculture and forestry, to provide healthy food and a healthy green environment to all citizens. We can invest in local food processing and herbal medicines to give employment to rural/tribal people so that their health and education needs can be fulfilled. We have to first improve the infrastructure to suit the needs of the farm sector.

Neither the Congress nor the BJP have prioritised the right policies to encourage the development of a healthy agricultural sector with a sense of commitment and urgency. The present policy of giving free power and agricultural loans promised by the Congress has also not helped the farmers in need. Hence, as a socially and politically conscious citizen of the world, I can only hope that people's movements such as the World Social Forum, particularly its women's section, will gather force and bring sanity for all.

After we have fulfilled the basic needs of the majority of our population I would then consider it worthwhile to think in terms of competing with

the Western world in creating wealth. Frankly speaking we do not need to do that either. I am convinced that a spiritual lifestyle based on the least possible amount of material possessions can give lasting happiness. I can say from my own experience of more than two decades of living in a Western country, that there is human misery in the today's so-called First World countries too.

Asha Kachru, Pune

Fear of Consumerism

I completely agree with your sentiment in the article "Remembering Babu" in Issue No.144 that India should make determined efforts to move along the path of progress. This for me means that we become literate, that men and women are treated as equal and everybody has enough to eat. However I find your emphasis on "prosperity" a little worrying. God forbid that India should ever take to industrialism after the manner of the West, which is keeping the world in chains. Gandhi warned us that if our nation took to similar economic exploitation, it would strip the world bare like locusts. I think that we should learn from Gandhi's example. I, for one, am worried that our lifestyles on earth today are not sustainable, and that they are coming at the expense of future generations.

Krishna, by email

Response from the Author

I have never suggested that we blindly imitate First World economic policies and value systems in shaping India's future. But I don't see any contradiction between generating wealth and ensuring that the basic survival needs of every citizen, as well as the wherewithal of a dignified life, are provided for all.

I do not think wealth generation has to be intrinsically exploitative if society ensures that it is not concentrated in a few hands. I also

believe it is possible to raise the standards of living and productivity without destroying the environment and health of people, provided a society follows judicious policies.

A spiritual life of "simple living and high thinking" cannot be imposed or mass produced by sermonising or putting restrictions on the access of people to the means of wealth generation.

Renunciation is attractive only if it is a voluntary choice and a person has something worth renouncing. But preaching the virtues of a simple life to those living in real poverty or those struggling hard to move out of poverty is likely to sound hollow to them.

Remember, Gandhi's ideal was *Ramrajya*, an age believed to be one of great prosperity rather than existence at a subsistence level.

Madhu Purnima Kishwar

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