

From Exotica to Disdain

The Modern Macaulayite View of India

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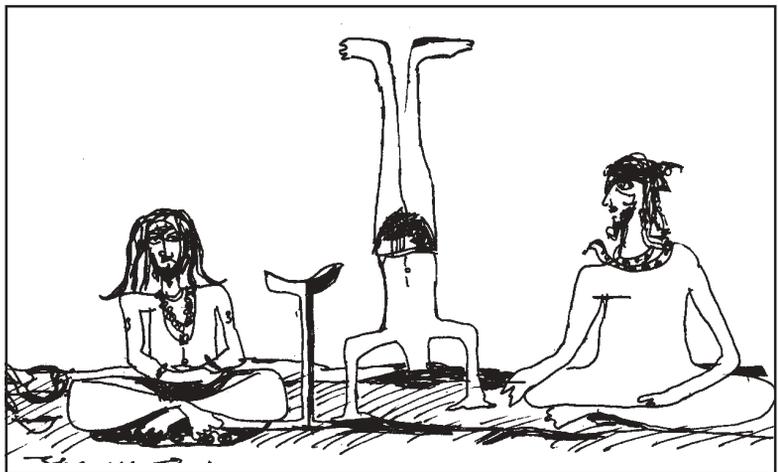
A year before the *Kumbha Mela*, I was approached by several American media teams seeking financial support to travel to India and cover the event. Having previously analysed the common stereotypes of India in academe and popular media, I began evaluating each proposal by inquiring into the reasons for this interest, and the level of understanding about the history and meaning of the event. I did not find a single proposal that satisfied the criterion that the team should include someone who understood what the *Kumbha Mela* was all about, or that the team should take the time and make the effort beforehand, to get an authentic education on the subject. Frustrated, I wrote articles and essays speculating that the Western media would probably end up focusing only on naked *sadhus*, cows and exotic Hindus doing strange things and behaving in a manner that “no rational Westerner could understand”. I have called this Western image of matters Indian the “wow factor”: the inevitable focus on magic, exotica, irrationality, and other-worldliness, which is supposedly absent in the West but found in plenty in India. This is what has happened in much of the Western media coverage of the *Kumbha Mela*, which, many have noted, has been translated rather crassly and simplistically as the “Pitcher Festival”!

The translation is technically correct, but misleading when shorn of an interpretive framework. There are many ways in which such a term could be explained, but one way is via India’s rich heritage of yogic sciences. The *Kumbha Mela* is, after all, first and foremost a gathering of *yogis and yoginis* from all over India and beyond; the term *Kumbha Mela* thus has a symbolic meaning fully concordant with the yoga tradition. From this perspective, Prayag is not only significant as the place where the three rivers converge: the Ganga, the Yamuna and the Saraswati. It is also significant as the symbolic confluence *par excellence* of yogic practice. From this point of view, the three rivers are the three central, subtle channels of the system of yogic psychophysiology. The Ganga is the lunar *Ida*, the Yamuna is the solar *Pingala*, and the hidden

Saraswati is the central *Sushumna*. Prayag is the “*kumbha*”, or the site in the lower torso where these three channels join.

The term *kumbha*-’pitcher, vase or flask’—refers to a yogic practice that falls within the rubric of *pranayama* or breath control techniques. The practice is called *kumbhaka* or “vase breathing”, and involves the “vase like” (i.e. expanded belly) diaphragm retention of breath. The purpose of this technique is to empty the *prana* from the right and left channels, and force them into the normally empty, central channel. This reverses the normal flow of *prana*, and leads to its concentration within the brain, which is in a potential state for consciousness advancement.

Thus, the *Kumbha Mela*, originally a festival held by, and for, yoga practitioners, should not be



divorced from its context or portrayed as merely a cacophonous gathering of bizarre figures. There are, of course, many other interrelated ways by which the festival could be explained: reference could also be made to its astronomical and mythical significance. In Indian literature, many sophisticated principles have been explained as stories involving forces, personified as *devas* and *devis*, at work, so as to allow their enactment as popular plays—the equivalent of modern multimedia presentations. The problem arises when no explanations are given at all, and the festival is merely portrayed as any other curiosity.

The recent earthquake in Gujarat had provoked similar coverage in the American press. It is amazing that in the lists of charities and aid organisations to which readers were asked to send donations, not one Indian entity was mentioned by *The New York Times*, *The Associated Press*, CNN or any other major media outlet. Jewish, Christian and a few well-known secular organisations, such as the Red Cross were the only ones in these long lists of relief bodies. Most of the footage shown in the news coverage was either about foreign relief organisations or the chaos characterising India's relief effort. It was about how foreign help was pouring in from various sources, and how Indians could not even properly manage to deliver it in a timely manner. CNN's Satindra Bhindra was taken off the air once the channel's white skinned journalists reached the scene. After all, how can one expect a brown journalist to be as credible as his white counterparts?

It is amazing to find that most Americans cannot believe that India has a very large number of its own indigenous social organisations (the equivalent of US non-profit

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organisations) that are not affiliated to Church institutions, or dependant on foreign patronage. Even many well meaning and intelligent Americans find it hard to accept such data about India's social engagement, its people's response to crises, its native wisdom and knowledge as capable of fueling progress. So, how does the American make sense of the prominent success of Indians in technology, medicine and other modern fields? They are merely seen as the West's success in civilising and upgrading the "third world". For most Americans, modernisation is synonymous with westernisation. Naturally, globalisation means westernisation. Colonialism is dead. Long live the West!

That India is still a distant and minor sideshow in the US was seen even in the coverage of Bill

Clinton's trip to India. In India, his visit made big news, if not the only news during that period. However, in the US, it was covered merely on the inside pages in *The New York Times* on most days. This was a surprise, especially since so many US media personnel had gone there to report on the trip. An Indian friend of mine proudly told us that at his son's school they had finally talked about India in class because of Clinton's trip. When asked what exactly they discussed about India, he did not know any details. The mere fact that India was mentioned made him proud. Not satisfied with this, I asked to speak with his son. It soon became apparent that all they had discussed was how the president had gone to India to protect the world from the nuclear threat in the region and to see how the US could resolve the Kashmir dispute. What a difference of perspective!

Indians Turn Macaulayites

But this stereotyping of India is not limited to the Western perception. Many elitist Indians, both in India and the US, seem to have turned into Macaulayites. At a group called SAJA (South Asian



Journalists' research reports in the West that scientifically verified the health benefits of yoga and ayurveda, there was a deluge of responses that termed my comments "false propaganda". My citing references, including Western reports from prestigious institutions, seemed to have little impact on them. Self-criticism is progressive and vital, but when it turns into self-hate, it becomes pathological—a mindset that is correlated to many Indian critics' selling out to Western agendas. By comparison, in China there is a government-backed renaissance of indigenous medicine, acupuncture, and psychic healing practices similar to, and in many cases derived from India's discoveries involving *prana*.

Constructing the 'Other'

This lack of understanding about India runs deeper than any one episode or symptom indicates. American high school and college textbooks purvey Western chauvinism in their portrayal of India. This trend worsened when the US State Department's strategy during the Cold War reduced the non-Western world into "areas" for containment, and India was located as part of a newly invented area called "South Asia". Under a federal programme called Title VI Grants, universities could get governmental funding to set up South Asian Studies departments to study the region previously called the Indian Subcontinent. What resulted politically is well known: the support of Pakistan to provide "balance" and to "contain" India in "South Asia".

While many Indians have grappled with this problem of image, they have done so only symptomatically and without studying the underlying causes. In

American schools, the history taught is entirely centred on Europe and USA, with most of the "others" relegated to the status of objects. India is said to not even have a history—a tragic view started by Hegel and now adopted by many Indians themselves. Hegel's blatant western chauvinism states that it is only the West that is progressive, that only the West experiences and promotes change, and that only the West has rationality as its basis for success. Civilisation is projected as mainly the story of the triumphant West, which carries the burden of civilising the various "others". India typifies the "other", and both the media and academe barely ever get beyond the tired and predictable old images of a country that is "chronically backward" and that can be partially cured by the West's help and support. Indian civilisation is often reduced to a mere geographical attribute and, as such, a culture that does not have anything to share in terms of universal ideas in the manner in which the Greeks and the other Europeans are assumed to have. A geographically defined people and society are reduced to a mere place, nothing more, and carry no more attributes than the land does: the monsoon, snakes, tigers and other peculiar attributes unique to the "region". Thus, India's civilisation and culture are located in the American mind as a blob of space on the world map, and one whose

defining characteristic is its "problems".

Indian Collaborators

But it is India's own intellectuals who could also be blamed for exacerbating this primitive image of India. Extending Hegel's concept of the 'West' as the centre of his linear theory of history, Marx developed the idea of a gradual progression of economic development from feudalism, through capitalism, to socialism and communism. Like Hegel, Marx saw this progression as basically occurring only in Europe, with the rest of the world frozen in an infantile stage of development. Marx described India as being caught in what he called the Asiatic Mode of Production (AMP). He posited that India was trapped in a stagnant, unhistorical economic state in which "oriental despots" wielding absolute power governed a static village culture. But the economic prosperity and technical advancement of India and China, prior to Europe's emergence from the Dark Ages into the modern and colonial period, are too well documented to be dismissed, even though this did not fit in with the simplistic models of Hegel and Marx. These eurocentric views reveal a profound ignorance of the actual histories and economies of Asian countries.

This created a bind for Indian marxists, who wanted to apply marxism to India but who, out of nationalist sentiments and/or intellectual honesty, could not accept that the AMP was an accurate portrayal of India's economy. The tactic adopted by Indian marxists such as V.K. Thakur, R.S. Sharma, D.N. Jha and B.N.S. Yadav was to reject the AMP theory, and to argue instead that ancient and medieval India was feudal in the European

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sense. This feudalising of India's past allowed them to fit India into the marxist scheme of development, and to claim that marxist reforms could proceed in India, as in Russia. Their theories have been criticised on the grounds that European institutions and practices of feudalism simply have no parallel in India, and that they were distorting the portrayal of Indian history to fit the marxist paradigm. Unable to look at Indian history and culture in its own right, these modern macaulayites adopted a eurocentric perspective to try and join the West. Far more subtle and consequential than the negative outward image of India has been the negation of Indian identity by many young NRIs who, upon entering colleges, get south-asianised as an escape from indianness. Leading this effort on many American campuses are the cadre of marxist-trained academicians from India, who want to erase any and every trace of India's traditional identity, and who want to reverse-engineer India's past into a gloss on, and of, a supposedly "composite" culture. It is an irony that these Left/marxist scholars have found a haven in the US for their ideology and their selective recounting of history. If it is not red, it is automatically dismissed as saffron. For these academic stalwarts it is *de rigueur* to insist on a South Asian identity, barely acceptable to claim an Indian identity, and loathsome to tolerate a Hindu identity. This splash of "red" in a white academic setting has merely led to the "pink-washing" of Indian history and heritage as purveyed in America. While a few colleges still have Indology Departments or India Studies Centres, most academic analyses of matters Indian have moved into South Asia programme. This has led to the treating of India and Pakistan

studies on par, much to the delight of India-baiters and the Pakistani-American cliques. India is seen through the issues facing the region as a whole, and not as a major civilising force in history or as an important player in today's globalisation. India does not get the attention given to China, Russia, Japan, or even Mexico and Canada.

While West Looks Eastward

Most educated Americans respect the Latin and Greek Classics, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, and the best schools include these as part of the core curriculum. They find it incredulous to hear that few well-educated Indians have learnt Sanskrit or India's Classics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, and that many elitist Indians hold great contempt for such traditions—a reflection of their own inferiority complex. Americans simply assume that every Indian must know at least some yoga and be a regular practitioner of meditation, or at least be sympathetic to these sophisticated systems now being rediscovered by Western scientists. It is interesting to note that now there are between 10 to 20 million Americans practicing yoga regularly, and as many as 1,00,000 yoga teachers, 95 per cent of them non-Indians. Partly as a reaction to this self-alienation on the part of many Indians with respect to their own indigenous civilisation, the New Age movement, that has upward of 50 million American adherents, has started to repackage many of these eastern ideas into a new blend of western chauvinism and Judeo-Christianity. Many white Americans, while privately very devoutly Hindu, have said that this public distancing is merely to

safeguard against association with any taboo, or superstitious or socially backward image, given the self-hate of many Indians themselves.

In American universities, literature and social studies departments are now full of very promising young Indians, but for a large part their focus has been on denigrating India herself. Many of them have only superficial knowledge of their own heritage. Women's status in Indian society seems to have become one main target of the demonising campaign, made particularly dangerous since Indian women are often paraded at conferences in this war against "primitive" non-western cultures. The strings are, of course, in the hands of those who have no genuine interest in, or capability to help the plight of Indian women, but who use this 'Hindu shame' as ammunition for their own agendas. One is reminded that during Britain's rule over Ireland, the British created a new class called the Anglo-Irish, consisting of a few Irish who were upgraded by one notch in their socio-economic status in exchange for adopting British loyalty, and then were used to legitimise the rule over the working class Irish. This is detailed in a new book called *How the Irish Became White*, by Harvard University's, Noel Ignatiev. Do we now have a phenomenon of *desis* becoming off-white?

Two Categories of NRIs

The NRIs in America can be segmented into two categories: those who are prominent in the "success" industries—the main ones being information technology, medicine, and hotel/business ownership—and those who received their education in India, mainly in the humanities, and then registered as graduate students in American universities and were hired

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as faculty, often for their “exotic” heritage and their pandering to western hegemony. A few of India’s top educational institutions have become the academic seminaries that produce such angry young women and bilious young men, perfectly catering to the western agenda. It is an amazing dichotomy to find Indian Americans of the “success” industries taking interest in and funding programmes to preserve and enrich their Indian heritage, while those ignorant of their tradition, hence self-alienated, and taking refuge in a programme to become off-white, not only shy away from their Indian links but take pride in bashing any aspect of India that is uniquely hers. The dilemma, therefore, is that it is the humanities professors who control the portrayal of India in academe, while it is the second-generation children of the former who go to these prestigious colleges. NRIs have often complained that colleges have alienated their children from their heritage.

As a reaction to all this, several students’ groups have been organised recently to offer religious and cultural activities to nurture their Indian traditions. However, in some cases, the organisations have gotten appropriated for political interests, thereby compromising the true spirit of Indian tradition. One extreme view does not cure another. Yet few from either extreme have risen above the bi-polarity of discourse in which one mainly focuses on criticising the other to ‘prove’ one’s own position.

Need for a Revised Gaze

It is no surprise, therefore, that the American media is so full of stereotypes when it comes to the portrayal of India, both modern and ancient. The Infinity Foundation has recently given a grant to a journalism professor to critique the

coverage of India in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* over the past three years. It will take many such studies to make an impact on American journalists stationed in India, and their editors in the US demanding exotica. Meanwhile, the editors of *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* continue to ignore angry letters challenging the veracity, completeness, balance and fairness of their correspondents’ reports.

Worse than having no knowledge is to have misleading stereotypes, consciously or unconsciously applied, to interpret a given situation. Given the superficial, incomplete or outright false ideas that pervade western notions of the ‘others’, it was no surprise that I did

not find American audiences of the *Kumbha Mela* coverage gain any appreciation for India’s indigenous sciences, culture, *dharma* or values. Besides not explaining its spiritual significance, the media also did not cover the numerous lecture series, and the yoga and meditation classes held at the *mela*. While emphasising chaos-another stereotype about India-it failed to point out the infrastructural and management challenges in organising the event which are massively greater than the crowd control at Disneyworld or any other Western event ever. □

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When Men Laugh at Themselves

One day The Lord came to Adam, and said, “I’ve got some good news and some bad news”. Adam said, “Well, give me the good news first.”

The Lord explained, “I’ve got two new organs for you. One is called a brain. It will allow you to create new things, solve problems, and have intelligent conversations with Eve. The other organ I have for you is called a penis. It will give you great physical pleasure and allow you to reproduce your now intelligent life form and populate this planet. Eve will be very happy that you now have this organ to give her children.”

Adam, very excited, exclaimed, “These are great gifts you have given to me. What could possibly be the bad news after such great tidings?”

The Lord looked upon Adam and said with great sorrow, “You will never be able to use these two gifts at the same time.”

At a local coffee bar, a young woman was expounding on her idea of the perfect mate to some of her friends. “The man I marry must be a shining light amongst company. He must be musical. Tell jokes. Sing. Entertain. And stay home at night!”

An old granny overheard and spoke up, “Girl, if that’s all you want, get a TV!”

For months he had been her devoted admirer. Now, at long last, he had collected sufficient courage to ask her the most momentous of all questions: “There are quite a lot of advantages to being a bachelor,” he began, “but there comes a time when one longs for the companionship of another being — a being who will regard one as perfect, as an idol; whom one can treat as one’s absolute own; who will be kind and faithful when times are hard; who will share one’s joys and sorrows. To his delight he saw a sympathetic gleam in her eyes. Then she nodded in agreement. Finally, she responded, “I think it’s a great idea! Can I help you choose which puppy to buy?”

—sent by Aditya, Chennai