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THE INDIAN ELITE AND AMERICA: EMULATION WITHOUT DEPTH

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“Osama BinLaden and similar other persons have changed the whole world and has virtually prompted the United States to join hands with India in her fight against terrorism” (NCERT 2002, Class IX text book in Social Science)

I

It was only as recent as 1946 when the Indian Citizenship Bill was introduced in the United States of America. This allowed Indian immigrants to seek naturalization for the first time in America. They could now vote as American citizens. This bill also fixed a quota of 100 immigrants annually. The Immigration Act of 1965 removed this quota which resulted in a dramatic increase in Indian immigration to America. From a mere 5000 Indians in 1960, the number climbed to 350,000 by 1970. It was almost as if there were thousand upon thousand Indians waiting to be let in at the shores of America. Between 1980 and 1990 alone the community has grown by as much as 103%. According to the 2000 U.S. census there are about 1.6 million Indian-Americans, and the number is constantly growing¹.

¹ See Website [Http://www.nrlinks.com/usa/indians/facts.asp](http://www.nrlinks.com/usa/indians/facts.asp)

Indians have obviously taken advantage of the opportunities that have been offered to them when the United States relaxed its immigration quotas to accommodate them in large numbers. In fact, Indians corner a full 50% of H-1B visas issued each year by America. Obviously, there is a significant amount of encouragement of Indian immigration by the American authorities. What also needs to be noted is that the Indians who are welcomed to America usually come from professional backgrounds. Four out of ten startups in Silicon valley are promoted by Indians. Approximately 300,000 Asian-Indians work in the Information Technology related sectors in the Silicon valley alone. Many other Indian-Americans run Fortune 500 companies such as Rono Dutta who is President of United Airlines, and Rajat Gupta who is managing director of Mckinsey and Company. In fact, there are proportionately more Indian professionals in America than the average American, and, what is more, the average household income of Indians is also much higher than the U.S. average.² The profile of Indian H-1B visa holders in the United States is also indicative of this trend. About 83% of them are between 20-34 years of age, and their median wage is as high as \$ 45,000.³ In terms of the number of overseas students studying in American universities, Indians top the list. In 2000-1 alone there were 66,836 students from India. Of course, this also works out in America's interests as it is estimated that higher education is now United States' fifth largest service sector export. Foreign students contribute a staggering sum of \$ 12 billion to the American economy.⁴

Unlike migrants to Canada, or even to U.K. where there a large number of Indians from working class backgrounds⁵, Indians in America, as we have just seen, are in the main, professionals. The call of America has thus been a very powerful one for the Indian elites for some decades now and clearly precede the current liberalization phase. This appears as a bit of a conundrum, particularly in the context of the foreign policy postures of both U.S.A. and India over the last four decades or so. While India tilted quite demonstratively towards the U.S.S.R during the cold war years driven solely by domestic compulsions, America came out in full-throated support of Pakistan, even during the Bangladesh crisis.

² *ibid.*

³ S.Uma Devi, "Globalisation, Information Technology and Asian Indian Women in US," *Economic and Political Weekly* (Mumbai), vol. 37, no. 43, pp.4421-4428, p.4422.

⁴ *Hindustan Times*, 18 November, 2002.

⁵ In England even today as many as 45% of those of Indian origin perform manual work.. See <http://www.southasian.org.uk/research-proporeport-app8.html>

II

Indian elites and Americans thus had a peculiar ambivalent relationship with each other. On the one hand, the United States was where a large number of Indian elites would like to be (given the chance), and on the other hand they were deeply unhappy about the fact that America always took Pakistan's side in matters that affected India's national integrity and sovereignty. Obviously, chafing at the demands made on India by the United States, India's foreign minister said bluntly: "Our size, our potential strength, our traditions and heritage do not allow us to become a client state."⁶The Indian foreign minister was clearly referring to the fact that Pakistan was being rewarded for signing a military pact with America, whereas India was determined to go the "non-aligned" way. Americans readily concluded that India's "non-alignment" was a scarcely concealed tilt towards the Soviet Union. In fact, Vice-President Nixon went further and told the *New York Times* (December 9-10, 1953) that he was in favour of taking a strong stand against India and argued that "an early practical step in that direction would be to strengthen the friendlier nations in this orbit, beginning with Pakistan."

In many quarters these disagreements on foreign policy were seen as deep hostility to America at a popular level. This was far from true. In fact, most Indian elites felt rather let down by America's pro-Pakistani policy but were nevertheless deeply drawn to the American way of life, to its glamorous rich and famous, and to the many American universities for higher studies. In fact, as the generosity of American universities is much greater than what British universities can afford, most Indians seeking admissions abroad prefer to go to the United States rather to any other country in the world. I have heard it being said by British diplomats in India that they have lost out to America as many of the current generation of Indian decision makers are increasingly being trained in American universities. They are no longer from Oxford, Cambridge or London School of Economics where the earlier generations of Indian elites went for a "foreign degree."

Elites and non-elites would all like to go where there is money to be made. In earlier years farmers and labourers went out to Canada and England, when they did not go to the various British colonies as indentured labourers. In recent years the Middle East is another great attraction, but largely for the less educated Indians. Though there are some very qualified Indians in the Middle East as well, it is America that attracts the majority of the best and brightest from this land.

⁶ *Times of India*, June 17, 1976.

America is not just where one can make a fortune. Unlike the Middle East, America is also where Indians would like to be. The Middle East is where Indians go to make money and then come back home with their salted cash and thinly concealed contempt for the countries of the region. They have no admiration for the Middle East- for its culture, for its people, or for its politics. America is different. America is where beautiful people live, America is where there is Hollywood, America is where there is freedom from antiquated mores and customs: in short America is the great new world where economic opportunities come one's way unencumbered by traditional social norms. No veils and surreptitious assignations, no midnight knocks and sudden deportation orders. America is not just the land of plenty, it is also open spaces, both literally and figuratively.

The America of the Indian imagination, to which Indian elites have contributed significantly is one of high consumption and bright lights and an easy life. Those Indians who have stayed on in America realize that there is a lot more to America than just that. There is a great stress on individualism, on innovation, on being emotionally self-sufficient, and, finally, in going by the law. Where else but in America will one find huge bill boards exhorting drivers to "Buckle up- it's the Law?" Certainly a sign like that in Paris would offend many French people. David Reisman's *Lonely Crowd* is a wonderful illustration of what it is to be an American from within.⁷ In fact, I believe that Alexis de Tocqueville's famous 19th century work on America is still a masterpiece by contemporary standards.⁸ My arguments in this paper is premised on the fact that very few Indians who otherwise love America and flaunt their American connections, really know what it is to be an American, or what are the abiding principles and mores by which most Americans conduct themselves.

III

The liberalization of the Indian economy in 1991 further accentuated the tendency towards America. Many elite Indians believed that Nehru's dual economy model was completely misguided. They nevertheless revered Nehru for his charisma, for his very English ways, and for his ability to descend to the mass level in spite of his rather affluent background. Of course, Nehru did not go to study in America, in those days they went to England. Nehru's economic policies were succoured by the exigencies

⁷ David Reisman, 1950, *The Lonely Crowd*, New Haven: Yale University Press.

⁸ Alexis de Tocqueville, 1954, *Democracy in America*, New York: Alfred A Knopf.

of foreign policy. India chose non-alignment, so America preferred Pakistan to India. This is what led Nehru and subsequent Indian leaders to reach out to Russia. On account of these foreign policy equations the Nehruvian economic format gained greater legitimacy at home. No Indian leader of those times dared not publicly make unkind remarks to the principles of Nehru's watered down "socialism".

The termination of the cold war and the fall of Russia ended all such foreign policy led economic doctrines at home. The Indian elite could now be unambiguously pro-American in its outlook. The shift towards privatization was so radical and swift that it even took the established capitalist houses in India by surprise. Rahul Bajaj, Gautam Thapar, K.K.Birla, Ramlal Goenka, are some of the big Indian corporate figures in India who initially opposed the liberalization drive when India opened its doors to foreign capital. The Confederation of Indian Industries (CII) and the lesser business association, the Federation of Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) were also deeply suspicious of the gung-ho liberalization that the government of India was advocating. Thus, while the Indian business upper crust had settled down to a comfortable relation with government sponsored license *raj* economics and did not want any radical changes in it⁹, there were other sections among the Indian elite who were straining to be more American in terms of economic policies.

Over the last decade or so, the liberalization partisans have certainly won the day. Now, there is hardly any opposition from any significant quarter to either the IMF or to the entry of foreign capital in India. As the World Bank categorically announced: " 'India has fundamentally altered its development paradigm' and the reforms 'have ended four decades of planning and have initiated a quiet economic revolution.' "¹⁰ The planning process as we knew it has been severely downgraded. There has not only been a substantial downfall of public investment, but there is also a move to disinvest from public sector enterprises.¹¹ In all of this there is a clear misunderstanding of the American economy as perceived by the Indian political and industrial elite. While America's support of private enterprise and initiative is widely recognized, the support that the government of the United States provides to education and health and to

⁹ See Baldev Raj Nayar, 1998, "Business and India's Economic Policy Reforms, *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol.33, pp.2453-2468; pp.2454-7.

¹⁰ Quoted in Baldev Raj Nayar, 1998, "Political Structure and India's Economic Reforms of the 1990s," *Pacific Affairs*, vol. 71, pp.335-358; p-.335-6.

¹¹ Today there are some opponents to the disinvestment of critical public sector oil companies. In all likelihood this opposition is not a principled one but is inspired by political infighting within the ruling coalition. Bal Thackeray and the Shiv Sena, which he heads, seem to be on the side of the non-disinvestors, whereas it is widely known that they were in favour of this with respect to public sector hotels in Mumbai.

agriculture go largely unnoticed, particularly in India. The fact that public expenditure in America for health and education is 12% of its GDP, while that of India is only 4.1% is not widely discussed, perhaps not even known, in elite Indian circles. Likewise agricultural subsidies in the United States is about four times higher than what it is in India.¹² America's public expenditure is probably one of its best kept secrets, at least for India.

When President Bill Clinton came to India and openly signaled that he was more favourably disposed towards India than to Pakistan it sent euphoric waves up and down the Indian elite class. Till the day he actually arrived in India there were many well to do Indians who expressed cynicism about Clinton. The impeachment motion against him in the American senate was being actively recalled. But after Clinton pronounced India as an ally and danced with women in a Rajasthan village all opposition to Clinton immediately disappeared and was replaced by fawning adulation. When Bill Clinton addressed the Indian parliament there was an unseemly scrambling among the Parliamentarians to shake his hand and to be photographed with him. Today, the hotel in which Clinton stayed in Delhi still proudly boasts of the Clinton menu in its most attractive and expensive restaurant. Quite clearly, Indians were waiting to be freed from the recessive anti-Americanism that lurked in their political genes. When the opportunity presented itself, after the end of the Cold War and a re- alignment of America's foreign policy, the Indian elite grasped America close to its uneasy and ambitious heart.

IV

But are members of the Indian elite willing to go the distance in their adulation of America? Admiration for America in most cases does not really include a thorough going appreciation of some of the fundamentals of what America stands for. The principle reason for this is that the two societies are vastly different from each other. America is largely a middle class society with a few very rich and a small minority of the poor. India, on the other hand, is characterized by a depressing and overwhelming poverty but with a thin crust of the well-to-do at the top. Economic differentiation in India is deeply etched which in turn aggravates the cultural and other primordial differences that characterize this society. Cultural diversity cannot hide the fact that for most people in economically

¹² Abusaleh Sharif, Prabir Ghosh, S.K.Mondal, 2002, "State Adjusted Public Expenditure on Social Sector and Poverty Alleviation Programmes," *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 37, pp. 767-87; p. 785. Ramesh Chand, Leena Mathew Philip, Subsidies and Support in Agriculture: Is WTO Providing a Level Playing Field," *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 36, pp. 3014-6, p. 3015. *The Economist*, November 30-December 6, 2002, p 48.

strained circumstances, cultural diversity does not increase their range of available options, but, on the other hand, successfully boxes them in categories and spaces that are very unyielding. Open cultural spaces and the easy mobility between cultural options are not what Indian cultural diversity can practically boast of.

Paradoxically, America is where class differences are ideologically sought to be neutralized in order to elevate the individual. Nothing can be more distant from the preferences of the Indian elite in this respect. For members of the elite class in India snobbery and class differentiation are semaphored constantly on a variety of axes. It is not as if all this is of recent vintage. If in America we have the Horatio Alger rags to riches model of upward mobility, in India, on the contrary, there is every attempt to demonstrate the elevated status of one's ancestors no matter how miserable the situation may be today. This is as true of caste origin myths as it is of everyday boasts of Indian elite members.¹³ Very few Indians who have done well will ever admit a humble class background. This is particularly true of the bilingual elite strata.

Thus, though there is a clear, stated preference for an American way of life, the main reason why it cannot be actually practiced is because the initial conditions are so different between India and the United States. The perception of America by the Indian elite has to be seen through this perspective. The distortions that arise are because of fact that America is one of the richest countries in the world and India one of the poorest.

It needs also to be remembered that the kind of caste and class stratification that exists in India makes it nearly impossible for upper class Indians to empathise with other poorer Indians as the gulf between them is very vast. From cuisines, to education, to consumer articles, the gap between a few affluent Indians and the rest is very wide. On the other hand, these same fortunate Indians believe that they have more in common with members of the American middle class, especially in terms of observable artifacts in their possession. Jeans, music systems, cars, refrigerators, travels to distant locations for vacations, are the things that they believe unite them with Americans. This is the major reason why the concept of the middle class in India is identified with consumption articles and not with universalism, norm abiding, and cultural homogeneity as elsewhere, particularly in America.¹⁴

Consumption is not something new to Indian society. Very often the idea of consumerism is not fully understood by the Indian elite as well as by intellectuals.

¹³ See Dipankar Gupta, 2000, *Interrogating Caste: Understanding Hierarchy and Difference in Indian Society*, New Delhi: Penguin Books, pp.69-85, and *passim*.

¹⁴ Joseph Stiglitz, 2002, *Globalisation and its Discontents*, London: Allen Lane, The Penguin Press; p.84.

Traditionally there were a number of ways by which the traditional upper classes/castes signaled their differences from the subordinated communities. From ways of tying their turban, to the kind of material their clothes were made of, to the utensils and the kind of food that was cooked, castes distinguished themselves from one another on a perpetual basis. There was, as semiologists would say, a redundancy of signs. Till very recently, Jats were not allowed to ride a horse or carry firearms by the superior Rajput community.¹⁵ Again, till very recently, silk Kancheepuram saris were only worn by Brahman women in South India.

Consumerism in western societies is about consuming signs as Baudrillard had described some time ago.¹⁶ What needs to be noticed in this connection is that the open consumption of signs demands a society with a developed purchasing power. Failing this, consumerism takes on a different meaning. While consumerism in America is driven by the desire to belong and identify with the rest, in India it is about being able to stand apart from the crowd. That America has moved a long distance away from Thorsten Veblen's description of the leisure class and conspicuous consumption¹⁷ is not fully appreciated, unfortunately not even in America.

That there was a growing mood in America against conspicuous consumption was noticeable in the deprecatory tone that Thorsten Veblen employed in the *Theory of the Leisure Class*. There was no admiration or awe in the way Veblen talked about the conspicuously consuming population of his society. Again, the transformation that has taken place in America is not because of a change of heart, or because of a concerted ideological move, but rather because the secular increase in consumption power neatly dove tailed with the American ideal of equality to produce, unarguably, the world's strongest consumer society.

The Indian consumers have a long way to go yet. Whereas America has 365 television sets per 1000, the figure stands at only 71 for India. Even in the sale of jeans the United States outstrips India by far. There are 500 million jeans in America as compared to 35 million in India. Whereas the personal computer penetration in India is only 5 per 1000, the figure is 770 per thousand for the United States. When it comes to cars the figure stands at only 30 million for India, i.e., roughly 3% of the population own cars. And yet, when it comes to discerning the middle class, the emphasis in this country

¹⁵ K.L.Sharma, 2001, *Reconstructing Caste, Class and Tribe*, Jaipur and Delhi: Rawat; p. 115, p. 107.

¹⁶ J. Baudrillard, 1981, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of Signs*, St.Louis: Telos Press.

¹⁷ Thorsten Veblen, 1970, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, London: George Allen and Unwin., p. 112, and *passim*.

is to reckon its size in terms of consumer articles. The middle class drive is for consumer goods and other such “artifacts” which when possessed they believe will make them more like the first world Americans. But where is the comparison?

The American consumer has left Veblen way behind, but the Indian consumer is trying to catch up with his depiction of the conspicuously consuming class. But whereas Veblen sneered at this category of people, there is a fair degree of admiration in India for them. Business projections are gleefully made about how big the Indian market is going to be, though in most cases such hopeful moments have usually been very shortlived. When it comes to marketing, it is interesting that even today a large number of Indians are wary of the quality of produce they buy, even though they may have a brand name attached to it. On 28th of October in a televised call in show on Star News (India), a majority of those who rang up the TV station expressed disquiet about the reliability of brand name products. In India the ordinary purchaser still functions within a system where information is asymmetrical between buyer and seller- the kind of situation which George Akerloff and Joseph Stiglitz have separately talked about.

V

Whereas Thorsten Veblen could scoff at the conspicuously consuming class, Indian planners and well-wishers of the Indian economy are depending on exactly this section to take India’s economy forward. The Indian state is clearly betting on the conspicuously consuming class as it has significantly decreased Plan expenditure as a percentage of its GDP. Quite predictably, this has led to a fall in the growth of Public Sector employment. This aspect of India’s economy is clearly guided by the western model. In numerous discussions with contemporary policy planners and government advisers, I have been told repeatedly that the market is the main driving force and that we should have done long back what the Americans have been telling us for over forty years.

As was mentioned earlier, consuming to mark out distinctions is an integral part of Indian social practice. The well to do consumer does not want to belong as much as to mark out differences in status positions. In a true consumer society, on the other hand, belonging is more compelling than separation. But as long as there is a great paucity of purchasing power for the overwhelming majority of people in the subcontinent consumption will continue to function as diacritics of distinction.

The earlier distrust of America that emerged from foreign policy differences are clearly history today. In fact, the latest textbook for Class VI students produced by the National Council of Education Research and Training makes a mention of this rather unambiguously. According to the authors, after 12th September (i.e. ,the day after the World Trade Centre collapsed), relations between India and America became really cordial. The colophon on the opening page is part of a larger quotation which needs to be reproduced at a greater length:

India never shared the America's view that Jammu and Kashmir is a disputed territory and that Pakistan also has a major say in this regard.... However the story of relationship (sic) between India and the United States after 11 September 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States ...is quite different. In fact, it has taken a new turn that promises to unite the two democracies into closer bonds on matters civilisational, economic, political, strategic and military. Osama Bin Laden and similar other persons have changed the whole world and has (sic) virtually prompted the United States to join hand with India in her fight against terrorism.¹⁸.

While this might sound like the strangest thing to include in a text book for children, the observation itself is valid, particularly as it applies to members of the Indian elite whose children would be reading this text.

The world was shocked by what happened to America, and for a while India forgot about her own political problems. There was genuine outpouring of grief and anger at the devastation to the World Trade Centre. Not too many people thought about Pentagon's destruction, though. This was quite in keeping with the way the international community also reacted. That the World Trade Centre was also a symbol of affluent, technologically advanced and beautiful America surely played a significant role in contributing to the grief among elite Indians. Loss of life too was an added dimension, so also was the audacity and the sheer cold bloodedness of the terrorists'. Yet, what seemed to stand out were two important features. The first was that the symbol of modern, rich and glamorous America was leveled. Members of the Indian elite talked about their visits to New York and how they had gone to the top of the towers. They recalled also the layout of the area, and of the splendour that is Manhattan that spreads out as one looks down from the top floors of the World Trade Centre. The fact that they could identify personally with the destruction added to the angst among the Indian elite.

They would surely not have felt the same way if such an incident were to happen in Malaysia or Cairo. Some politically advanced intellectuals poured cynicism on the

¹⁸ NCERT, 2002, *Textbook in Social Science, Contemporary India, Class IX*, (authored by Hari Om, Savita Sinha, Supta Das, Neerja Rashmi), NCERT, New Delhi.

burgeoning sentiments of elite India's grief only to be severely snubbed. Later they too had to recant and said that it was not as if Americans deserved what happened, but the support they give to Palestine regrettably led to this terrorist attack. No mainstream newspaper or journal could afford to maintain a cynical attitude for long towards the fate of the World Trade Centre.

While the elite sections in the society grieved the most, it was the bilinguals amongst them that were the hardest hit. The chances that members of this category had visited America, and some may even have been up to the deck of the World Trade Centre Even if they had not actually been to the place, the fact that they had heard about the World Trade Centre and had seen pictures of it in numerous Hollywood movies, certainly built up a level of familiarity with the buildings and with the landscape of New York. A large majority of unilingual, or vernacular Indians, were definitely shocked, but their emotions lacked grief and empathy with America. While figures for this are hard to come by it is said that almost every Indian who had a friend in America wrote to that person, via electronic mail or by regular post, commiserating the devastation that America faced on account of terrorist attacks on September 11.

After September 11, India and United States moved ideologically much closer as well. The common enemy in both cases were Muslim militant organizations, and they both saw terrorists and fifth columnists lurking everywhere. That Pakistan's General Pervez Musharraf was not being roundly pilloried by George Bush was a matter of deep regret among the Indian elite and the political class of Delhi and elsewhere in India, but there was great sympathy for what America was doing to Afghanistan in retaliation. Indians could hardly forget that scarce two years ago an Indian plane was hijacked by Afghani and Pakistani nationals to Kabul and the Indian government had to eat humble pie and give in to the hijackers' demand by releasing a well known militant who was active in Kashmir. It must also be mentioned that for a majority of Indians the hijacking did not really matter. Airplanes were things in which the affluent traveled. The level of empathy was definitely much lower among the rest of the population who had seen an airplane only from the outside and in most cases, several hundred, if not thousands, of feet in the sky.

After September 11, it was really rather easy to work up a lot of political lather about Muslim terrorists in India. And in most cases, such hysteria was encouraged, and very rarely did sobering voices get a hearing. When riots against Muslims hit Gujarat in February 2002, the American action against Al Qaeeda in

Afghanistan was ever present in the minds of most Indians. It is true that anti Muslim sentiments have been assiduously cultivated in Gujarat over a long period of time. The Ayodhya temple issue not only pre dates September 11, but the hate mood that the BJP led organizations have successfully generated against Muslims in India gets its charge from demonizing Pakistan, and not from the Middle East, or elsewhere in the world. Interestingly, when September 11 is recalled by Hindu activists in Gujarat, it is primarily to justify excessive retaliation. It is not as if September 11 created a breach, the breach was already there and was being steadily widened. September 11 then is used not so much as to justify suspicion, animosity and worse against Muslims, *but to argue that just as America killed 50,000 Afghans because 5,000 of their own had died in the World Trade Centre crashes, so also every Hindu death should be avenged in terms of disproportionate revenge* (personal interviews with Gujarat supporters of the BJP).

VI

Why then does September 11 hold this kind of paradigmatic sway whenever attempts are made to understand the contemporary rise of ethnic and communal intolerance? In large measure it is because people are looking for an “objective” explanation to justify their subjective, and unwarranted, prejudices. The desecration of the Somnath temple took place long ago, so also did the Babylonian captivity of Jews. Historical recall of these incidents may or may not be accurate: besides so much has happened since then. But as nobody can deny the enormity of what occurred on September 11, it is September 11 that has been etched in a billion imaginations as an original, primeval fact. It is as if religious bigotry against Muslims began only post-September 11. This absolves the many hate brigades of their responsibility in stoking anti- Muslim passions for decades on end. September 11 conveniently wipes out the long and dubious record of anti Muslim activists, as from now on every attack against Muslims can be cast as being **reactive** in character. Once again, we can justifiably blame the victims.

September 11 functions today as the starting point of a certain kind of memory that is widely shared. It occupies a strategic position in popular consciousness that makes everything that happened before it irrelevant. September 11 makes us less self conscious about our own lurking prejudices. We can now argue, with a degree of credibility, that it is only after that fateful day that our collective innocence was destroyed worldwide. Professional communalists can ride on this mood for September 11 is just

that kind of an objective fact that can silence their secular and more academically oriented critics.

It is not as if the felicity with which September 11 is being used by sectarians cannot be combated, but suddenly the headwind against such efforts has become very strong. A large number of those who would have earlier argued for political temperance are somehow tongue tied today. It is as if September 11 has weakened their resolve, and they are no longer so sure of the universal applicability of humanitarian principles. Such is the seductive power of September 11 that majoritarianism may soon appear as a legitimate form of democracy in the Indian sub-continent.

Thus, while India may now claim to be standing shoulder to shoulder with America in fighting terrorism, it is nevertheless true, as the Gujarat episode so recently exemplified, that citizens are not treated as equals, especially if they belong to the minority community, in this case the Muslims. After September 11 there was a great degree of animosity that welled up in popular minds in the United States. Some redneck Americans even took out their shotguns to attack and terrorize Asian minorities. The American establishment came down heavily on these lawbreakers and even sentenced the person who killed a Sikh (mistaking him to be a Muslim) was sentenced to life imprisonment. Contrast this with the Gujarat case. Not only did the killers of Gujarat have the sanction of the administration, till today not a single rioter, not a single murderer, not a single looter, has been charged. Instead, the Gujarat Chief Minister, Mr. Narendra Modi, has publicly explained away the killings of Muslims because some Muslims attacked a train car which carried Hindu activists in Godhra. Mr. Modi recalled Isaac Newton and he said, "Every action has an equal and opposite reaction." While America may have run roughshod over the Afghani people, it has been very careful not to allow any attacks on its own civilian minority populations.

VII

If we move to the world of scholarship and of the intellectuals once again we find greater numbers of India's educated elite taking to foreign, especially, American education. As we discussed in the opening pages of this paper, America has shot ahead of Britain in attracting bright students and professionals from India. While the Indian educated elite go to America, there has been a major difference between those in the contemporary generation and the ones that had preceded them and had also gone abroad. In the past, going to the west was much more difficult, yet it was quite natural to

return home after earning a degree there. Not so any longer. Going abroad to study is the first step towards immigrating from India.

Naturally, there has also arisen a mindset among the Indian elite that Indian academics are not quite the same as those who have chosen to work abroad. Today, it is not at all uncommon to hear even senior members of national political parties commending a work as a typical Harvard or MIT product, and, in the same breath, undermining Indian scholarship.¹⁹

It seems just the other day when the authors we read about on India in college were all *in* India. Whether economics, history, sociology or political science, all the big guns in the Indian academic firmament were firmly rooted in the country. D.D. Kosambi, Susobhan Sarkar, K.N.Raj, Bhabatosh Datta, M.N.Srinivas, G.S. Ghurye, D.P.Mukerji, P. C Mahalanobis, D.T.Lakdawala, and the list can go on. I am sure that those readers of *The Times of India* who are forty and above today would have had a similar experience when they were in college and university. I do not think there was any Indian scholar of repute who wrote on India, and whose books were prescribed in Indian universities, who was not employed by some Indian university or research institution.

How things have changed- and so rapidly- in the last two decades! I think the trend began with Amartya Sen and Jagdish Bhagwati. I am sure neither Sen nor Bhagwati saw themselves as trendsetters in this regard, or perhaps they would never have left the Delhi School of Economics. For a variety of personal, and other, reasons they went westwards to glamorous jobs. I remember, as a college student, hearing of Amartya Sen's remarkable feats in economics, and how he was on the threshold of a Nobel Prize. This is a seventies story. By then Sen had done most of the path breaking work for which he is justly famous even today. As Sen was, and continues to be, a remarkably charismatic figure, his career choice to leave the Delhi School of Economics became a model worth emulating for many others who came after him.

From economics this trend has now spread to the rest of the social sciences. Ambitious Indian historians, sociologists, and political scientists today believe that their career goals should take them to universities in the west, otherwise they have just not made the grade. We are now not talking of those who for domestic, health, or other compulsions, have to leave the country. The truth is that getting a job abroad has today become an integral part of ambitious career tracks among Indian social scientists.

¹⁹ Jairam Ramesh, Book Review in *Seminar*, No. 513, May 2002.

One wonders, however, why these scholars could not do the same kind of work by staying on in India. In the social sciences, in particular, what advantages do they gain in going to foreign shores? It could be better research grants, but in the earlier years a lot of quality research work was done **by** Indians **in** India **on** India. Can it be said that Ghurye, Srinivas, Kosambi, or Lakdavala or Sukhomoy Chakravary, were wanting in research output and rigour? Far from it. True, it is much harder to get funds for research here, but that is not entirely correct if a social scientist is situated in Jawaharlal Nehru University or in the Delhi School of Economics. After all social research does not require big bucks like pure science does. Why then the exodus?

The major reason for ambitious Indian academics to aspire to a tenured position abroad is because that way they get better recognition at home. It is not as if every Indian academic in the west can, like Amartya Sen, become a social celebrity in their country of adoption. Moreover, a large number of such Indian academics in the west have a poor appreciation of western societies, probably because they feel a little alien out there. In spite of spending years in the U.K., or America, they generally research only on India, and have not produced any significant work that reflects their engagement with European or American society. So it is not because they want to experience the big wide world that they leave this country. At the slightest opportunity they are back in India studying some awful social curse of which there are plenty in the sub-continent.

The real attraction in going abroad is to be recognized at home. There is, of course, the usual monetary incentive, but I do not think that money is always the attraction. It is in India they get the moral remuneration that they long for. A book written on India by an Indian from a recognized university abroad immediately wins rounds of kudos in India. Such authors are feted and they become the toast of the town. Newspapers lionize them forgetting that for every research done on any subject by these migratory academics there are many more who are doing excellent work on similar themes in this country. Recently, a well-known commentator, who has all the right credentials, said in print that academics in India fare very poorly when compared with those Indians working out of foreign universities. Such remarks calmly overlook the legion of Indian academics **in** India who, even today, continue to teach and research in this country and make outstanding contributions to their respective disciplines.

Clearly, what Indian academics **in** India cannot provide is academic patronage. Unlike their counterparts in foreign universities they cannot employ intellectual coolies here to do their dirty work. Nor can they recommend an occasional seminar abroad to a

hungry Indian colleague. It must be acknowledged that as a people we do not have any self-respect and confidence in our own abilities. Ironically we were most assertive intellectually when combating British colonialism, but once we became Independent we lapsed into becoming intellectual subjects more comprehensively than ever before. It will take a while to sort out how this happened, but in the meanwhile we are quite content in handing over intellectual leadership to the west in practically every form, and from all political quarters. Even when it comes to studying India, western scholarship is better.

Eventually it is a matter of self-respect. Sadly, we in India do not respect ourselves, so naturally why should others respect us?

VIII

It is true that India and America are similar in terms of their concern with Affirmative Action/ Reservation. But here again, there are a great many dissimilarities in spite of certain superficialities. The differences once again stem from the fact that in India individualism is still unable to break free from traditional ascriptive identities²⁰. In discussing this issue we also have the occasion for featuring the rural elite, a category that has so far not been touched upon. While the Indian elite can be generally considered to be made up of bilingual urban affluent classes, there is a strong elite section which is based largely in villages, but who are restive about their rural location. They would like to use reservations to convert their rural power to urban jobs. This is largely because the dreams and aspirations of most villagers are not really in the countryside any longer. This is also true of the rural poor, but that is more immediately understandable given the utter destitution in which they live. Rural dominant castes, like the Ahirs, Gujjars and Jats, are politically active to use the reservation system and reserve quotas for themselves in urban jobs and in educational institutions.

It is around the question of quotas then that the major differences between Reservations in India and Affirmative Action in America crystallize. This difference is almost like a shift in *weltanschauung* and all other divergences between these two forms of preferential policies flow from this basic distinction. In India, from the start, reservations have been operationalised on the principle of quotas. Thus, in proportion to

²⁰ See B.D. Shiva Rao (ed.), 1968, *The Framing of India's Constitution: Selected Documents* (vol.2), Delhi: India Institute of Public Administration.

their population, approximately 23% of jobs and educational opportunities are reserved for the scheduled castes and tribes. In America, on the other hand, Title VII, which is the main weapon of the Affirmative Action programme, makes explicit that the quota principle will not be entertained at any cost. Title VII went on to assert that Affirmative Action will not in any case mean the lowering of qualifications and the undermining of merit. It is interesting that on this issue there has been a near unanimity in American politics. The left and the right, as well as the Affirmative Action activists, have all concurred that **quota** is a bad five letter word. Time and time again proponents of Affirmative Action go to great lengths to clarify that they do not support the quota system. In fact a 1988 survey found that about 50% of Black respondents said that they were against Affirmative Action and would not like to benefit from it.

That however does not mean in any way that America has rid itself of racist attitudes. Consider the following facts: Even though the proportion of White males in America is only 43% of the population they hold 95% of the top executive jobs in the country. Black adult males have an unemployment rate that is five times higher than the national average. Even the judicial system is weighted against Blacks. Possession of crack invites much higher punishment than the possession of cocaine. One must possess 100 times more cocaine than crack to receive the same sentence. In spite of medical evidence that shows that the two are equally harmful this law is still in force. This is because Black drug users are addicted to crack whereas the White addicts consume cocaine. Though roughly 13% of drug addicts in America are Blacks, which is roughly equal to their proportion of the American population, yet 74% of those serving jail sentences for drug possession are Blacks. Add to this the startling fact that between 1982 and 1992 the Los Angeles Federal Court did not convict a single White person for possessing crack.

Yet, what needs to be emphasized is that in spite of prevailing race attitudes, Blacks still feel reluctant to take advantage of the Affirmative Action programme.²¹ Even when they support and take recourse to Affirmative Action, American Blacks are against the quota system as well. The Gallup Poll of March 1991, the NBC Wall Street Journal of March 1994, and the L.A. Times Poll of January 1995, all confirm this tendency.²² American democracy from the very beginning has been strongly individualistic in character. Once again it is necessary to recall the Horatio Alger story of rising from rags

²¹ Richard F. Tomasson, Faye J. Crosby and Sharon D. Herzberger, 1996, *Affirmative Action: The Pros and Cons of Policy and Practice*, Washington: American University Press; p.61.

²² Thomas Sowell, 1995, *Preferential Policies*, New York: Walter Morrow and Company; pp.105-6.

to riches, the tales of how the west was won by sheer individual persistence and determination, and accounts of how the early settlers refused to allow status considerations of the old world to nestle in the colonies, are all parts of the popular lore that most Americans hold very dearly.

It is this individualistic spirit of the Americans that contrasts so starkly with the Indian case. Even so, it must be mentioned to the credit of Ambedkar that he saw reservations as a time bound policy, open to periodic appraisals.²³ Often the time bound feature in the original formulation of the reservation policy is picked up by opponents of reservations without enquiring as to whether or not the aims of the policy have actually been met. If onslaughts of this kind had continued there is no doubt that the quota system in India would have met with an early end. That it survives today and shows no sign of diminishing is because it was picked up by the superior castes to further their community ends.

It first began with the DMK in Tamil Nadu, and then quickly spread in the early 1970s, with Mrs. Gandhi's encouragement, to Karnataka and on to other parts of India. The dominant peasant castes in India, from the Vokkaligas in the South to the Yadavs, and Kurmis in the North began to apply the quota system to advance their own ambitions. This tendency climaxed with the Mandal recommendations. From this point onwards, the reservation programme in India departed from Ambedkar's vision. Reservations now were no longer for the downtrodden but to help powerful agrarian castes to consolidate themselves in cities. The politically superior communities are now the beneficiaries. Instead of equality of opportunity, the emphasis is now on equality of results. Instead of extirpating the caste system as Ambedkar had envisioned, the implementation in 1991 at the Central level of the Mandal committee recommendations allowed for the use of caste as a perennial political resource. Many of the Mandal Commission beneficiaries, as we have already hinted at, were members of dominant rural communities who wanted urban jobs quick. By putting Mandal recommendations to work, the government of India encouraged the principle of "equality of results" which was a far cry from the earlier reservations which were limited only to the Scheduled, ex-untouchable, castes.

Once reservations and quota were adopted by these superior communities to realise their community ends, the earlier emphasis on raising the downtrodden by enlarging socially valuable skills was given up. The quota system was now charged with

²³ See B.D. Shiva Rao, ed., *op. cit.*, p. 766.

the express purpose of capturing jobs and educational opportunities for the materially and politically better off. Naturally this led to a willful abandonment of qualifications, merit and institutional standards. The scheduled castes and tribes could not have accomplished this by themselves, and they are not the ones who are principally responsible in this regard. This abandonment of standards in favour of quota is very distant from the Affirmative Action programme as it has emerged today after several legal reviews. When a student is admitted to an educational institution in America on the basis of Affirmative Action the authorities must be satisfied that there is no dilution of standards, and that the student has a good chance of finishing the course and of being gainfully employed thereafter. Such considerations do not even enter the picture in the Indian scenario.

It is because powerful agrarian castes in India saw the quota system as a way of adding to their economic viability that the reservations for the scheduled castes and tribes have survived. If these superior castes were not allowed to play the quota system then the general animosity against scheduled castes and tribes in this society would have long seen to the demise of the reservation system. Of course, while dismantling it arguments about merit and individualism would have been forwarded, but these would have a hollow ring about them as individualism is far from being a generalised credo in India.

The elite classes that are emerging from among the beneficiaries of the reservation policy have now raised their expectations one notch higher. In his last Republic Day speech as the President of India, Mr. K.R. Narayanan, himself a member of the Scheduled Caste Community, hoped that the reservation system, quotas and all, would now be extended to the private sector as well. In doing so, Mr. K.R. Narayanan explicitly referred to the American model where, he argued, reservations applied to the private sector as well. Naturally, he glossed over the other major differences between India's reservation and America's affirmative action programme. This has encouraged a small, but significant, section of quota beneficiaries to politically agitate on this front. So far reservations were only given in government institutions, but for the emerging quota based elite, that was clearly not good enough. Liberalisation has unleashed a fresh set of ambitions all around. Further, given the fact that government investment and employment is steadily going down, it is almost natural for reservation activists, especially the elite among them, to eye greener pastures in the private sector as well.

IX

Are members of the Indian elite westernized or merely *westoxicated*? Westoxication refers here to a superficial embrace of western values without actually adhering to their core principles. We have found, time and time again, whether it be the issue of minorities, of reservations, of education, or even of consumerism, the Indian elite somehow manage to miss the point. In all such instances what really comes in the way of inhibiting a full blown modernity among India's elite is their inability to think in terms of the principles of universalism. It is difficult for them to appreciate that achievement should trump over the accidents of birth; they find it difficult to comprehend the values of citizenship where people enjoy substantive freedoms in a liberal democratic society; they believe in obvious status markers and diacritics of stratification that are pre-modern in their provenance. Whether it be education, politics, or the market, India remains fundamentally quite unmodern though there are a large number of people with the latest technical gadgets and other accoutrements of "modern" living.

Given the vast structural differences between the members of the Indian elite and others, their inability to empathise intersubjectively with others who are less fortunate is not surprising. There is no clamour among the Indian elite for quality education and health services for the citizens of the country. Social security nets are not even remotely on their agenda. New Delhi, the capital of India, established its last public multi-functional hospital cum research institution in the late 1960s. Since then there has been a mushrooming of private hospitals which are very expensive, but no other government hospital has come up. This is the state of affairs in the capital. Likewise, the elite classes in India are not interested in furthering state funded schools either. Almost without exception they send their children to private schools.

If truth be told then India's elite have not quite given up their links with the patron-client kind of network that was characteristic of traditional India. In spite of the fact that many of them are in politics, in administrative positions in the state, in the academia, and in the corporate world, much of their interactions are governed by ties of family, kin and social connections. This is one of the major reasons why it is so difficult to root out corruption in India. Corruption thrives primarily because from top to the bottom, for different reasons there is a subscription to the patron-client model. The poor are too miserable to be able to counter this reality and therefore use it when they can to their advantage. The better off flog it to the limit and prosper as patrons to some and act as clients to others higher up. There is almost nobody in India who has not been touched by

this patron-client nexus, which is why it is difficult to find any body who is not tainted in some fashion by corruption. It is corruption again, that is primarily responsible for the dilution of standards, which is why it was so difficult to resist the reservation protagonists when they insisted on quotas and not qualifications. The first to strike out against quality in all forms were the patrons, and the others quickly learnt the game and attempted to make the most of it. Remember, a patron is no good if the person cannot break the law.

Given these facets of the Indian elite, it is not surprising that when they take to western education, or to western commodities, or even to western education, they are only imitating the west, in fact, mostly America, but most superficially. Incidentally, they are not even conscious of how superficial they actually are. The term westoxication, therefore, adequately captures this variety of emulation which has no depth.