

The Indian Psyche

The recent nuclear test explosions have created a tremendous euphoria in India and expected condemnation, led by the United States. An average Indian does not associate the test with security concerns or power politics. Right-thinking Indians know that our priorities are such things as health, education, and containment of population.

Why then the euphoria? India, despite an having an ancient culture and a functioning, stable, large democracy and being a hunting ground for technically qualified people, has been persistently represented by the United States and the West as the home of poverty, filth, disease, and backwardness. There have been few occasions when progress made in India has been depicted by the Western media without bias or sarcasm. India is self-sufficient in food production. Its space program and other programs have improved communication and information systems tremendously. It is fighting a big battle to remove age-old social inequalities. The Indian economy has been stable, and Indians have taken to computers and software with ease. The entrepreneurial dynamism of Indians is second to none. India supplies highly qualified cheap labor to the United States. Indians enjoy freedom of expression and dissent, although we would like some of our leaders to keep their mouths shut, at least for a while.

A feeling of alienation permeates segments of the Indian society that have anything to do with the West, the United States in particular. The general perception among Indian scientists in leading institutions, most of whom are U.S.-trained, is that they are being discriminated against. Research papers sent to top international journals from India seem to be reviewed with a bias. Even if I manage to publish one of my papers in one of the best journals, it will seldom be quoted or have an impact, unless I have a U.S.-Western pedigree or a connection with an inner circle. There seems to be an inherent disbelief in the West that good research can be done in India. Even if I am invited to deliver a lecture at an international research conference, I am made to feel like an outsider or am aware that I have been invited to satisfy a condition that someone from a developing country be included for the conference to be eligible for funds from an international agency. My passport at the immigration counter in most European countries is scrutinized with extra care and often with a hostile attitude, even when I have adequate proof that I will not stay for more than 3 days. There are, of course, exceptions, but exceptions do not make the rule.

As director of a pioneering research institution in India, I am aware that we are threatened with sanctions. Some months ago (long before the nuclear tests), newspapers published articles saying that the Indian Institute of Science is on the watchlist of the United States because we are considered to be a think tank for India's defense efforts. We are an academic institution and carry out intellectually challenging problems in fields ranging from particle physics to ecology. Yet, an Indian order sent to Silicon Graphics causes a U.S. embassy official to investigate. We were denied a Cray computer for more than a decade (now we are happy we did not buy these heavyweights). Our scientists are appalled by how the United States, which values intellectual challenges and academic freedom, can have such a discriminatory attitude toward a country struggling to develop its science. We are often ignored by international funding agencies as "developed" when it comes to support for science. Our scientists are worried that the United States may put an embargo on visas for scientists and scholars from India. Already, the supply of research samples from U.S. government laboratories has been put on hold.

India has many, many problems, but we are tired of being depicted in the West as having negative qualities. Given this treatment, one clutches at any "victory" that makes one feel like an entity to be counted. It can be a win in cricket, a chess match, or a beauty contest, or even a nuclear blast.

Sanctions are self-defeating and counterproductive. India needs understanding, not threats or sympathy. We are a warmhearted people with tradition and capabilities. And to top it off, India has great admiration for America and Americans!

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