

The enigma that is India

The following editorial appeared in the Aug. 17 issue of *India Abroad*. It was brought to the attention of *The Brunswickian* by an Indian student who thought several of our readers might find it interesting.

By HOWARD ERDMAN

India. The second most populous country in the world. The third largest pool of scientists and engineers in the world. Ample and in some cases abundant natural resources. Among the top 10 industrial output, expanding and diversifying it continually. Advanced in nuclear technology, the sixth country to detonate a nuclear device. The second to produce a "test-tube" baby. Enormous strides in agriculture. A near-doubling of life expectancy since independence in 1947. A remarkably stable political system. The world's largest democracy.

Yet, with all of this and more, India suffers from a combination of relative neglect and a generally bad press. It deserves, and we should do, better.

A major reason for the neglect is, of course, the feeling that in terms of our global interests India simply doesn't count. When we do pay attention to any foreign countries, it is generally directed to those which are perceived to affect our well-being in some

important respect, for good or ill. Despite India's quite advanced techno-economic and military standing, it doesn't seem to qualify for much serious consideration, let alone respect.

To illustrate this, a simple exercise will suffice. List the countries of the world which you think "matter" to us. I very much doubt that India would be in the top 10. I would not be surprised if it failed to crack the top 20. It might not make the list at all.

President Jimmy Carter did visit India in January 1978, in large part to persuade the Indian government not to "go nuclear" and not to help others to do so. Serious enough, one supposes. Yet India was sandwiched in between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and a CBS-TV commentator covering the President's visit announced that with Carter's departure from India he was returning to "the substance" of his trip. Oil and Middle East allies counted. India, to this CBS newsmen, at least, did not.

If India were merely neglected, I might be disappointed but not upset. What is upsetting is the marked tendency to focus on the bad and/or the exotic when we do think about India. A defense of this neglect, coupled with a characteristic in former ambassador Daniel Patrick Moynihan's rhetorical question (*Playboy*

March 1977) "I mean, what does it export but communicable diseases?"

Moynihan, of course, knows better. The CBS reporter knows better. But each in his own way succumbed to the apparently irresistible temptation either to dismiss India altogether or, as in Moynihan's case, to take a verbal cheap shot.

Moynihan's remark evoked what is surely the dominant image of India - that of a desperately poor, disease-ridden, over populated country, which cannot get its act together. Possibly a basket case that is so far gone that it would be discarded when the time comes to apply the doctrine of triage.

"An Area of Darkness" "A Wounded Civilization"; "The Continent of Circe" - so proclaim the titles of three of the many books which focus on India's undeniable problems. (The Government of India itself classifies over 40 per cent of the population as living below the poverty line.)

"I never saw a fat baby" - so proclaimed the President's mother, Mrs. Lillian Carter, once a Peace Corps volunteer in India, introducing a TV as for a relief agency. Indians are weak and starving "because they don't eat meat" - so proclaimed John Belushi on "Saturday Night Live."

"The skid row on the money market" - so proclaimed William Buckley in one of his syndicated columns. A "soft state" - so proclaimed Gunnar Myrdal in a famous study of Asian development. "A functioning anarchy" - so proclaimed former ambassador John Kenneth Galbraith. Beggars everywhere, people sleeping in the streets, squalor and disease wherever one turns, and so on. One rarely, if ever, reads or hears anything positive.

Another cluster of images focuses on India the exotic. Some of them are, in fact, quite positive. "India - the Ultimate Fantasy" said Bloomingdale's department store in a massive two-page *New York Times* spread last year, tempting the buying public with seductive scents and silks, gems and artifacts, all fit for a maharaja or

marharani, of course. To touch, to smell - well, you were virtually guaranteed to experience instant Nirvana. If only for reasons of profit, Bloomingdale's made India sound good.

Other exotic images may be less enthusiastic or flattering but are at least not negative. "India - land of mystery, home of the king cobra, the Taj Mahal, and, of course, the Madras shirt." So proclaimed NBC sports (Jan. 14, 1979) in introducing coverage of a camel race from - "Pushkar Downs" a small, dusty track in a remote Indian village.

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The expert commentator was a straggly-haired Hindu holy man who never said a word. A comic interlude, after which we return to the "substance" of NBC sports coverage.

During Carter's visit, the media entertained us with visual and verbal coverage of the efforts, by an elegantly clad and specially summoned orderly, to dispose of a fly that was flitting around the President's plate at one of the official dinners.

Rather, more serious, but also in the exotic category are the accounts of Indian elections, where, alongside quite serious coverage, we are from time to time told of a voter who was killed and eaten by a tiger on the way to the polls. And so it goes.

All of these bits of exotica have paled into insignificance, however, by the portrayal of Premier Moraji Desai: He drinks his own urine. *Newsweek*, in an otherwise

sensible account of Indian politics (Oct. 24, 1977), noted parenthetically that the Prime Minister "lectures occasionally on the value of drinking one's own urine." *Time* (Oct. 24, 1977) showed Desai peering intently into a cup or mug, captioned its story "Drink Up, Drink Up", and wrote only of his diet in general and his urine drinking in particular.

On the occasion of Desai's June 1978 visit to the U.S. to address the United Nations, a few minutes of a segment on *60 Minutes* and virtually all of a brief interview by Barbara Walters (June 13) were devoted to this cosmically-important topic.

The destiny of 650 million people? India's role in the world? No. Focus on the Prime Minister's idiosyncracies - that will sell. When coupled with "straight" reporting, these bits of exotica virtually guarantee that we shall not take India seriously.

It would be foolish, if fashionable, to argue that we ignore or misrepresent India at our own peril. Yet, even if others do not share my judgment about India's present importance, it is likely that in the not-too-distant future many of us will have to think more about India than we do now. It will be helpful if we can do so sensibly. This will require some modest determination to go beyond the titillation and the cheap shots, and to develop a more balanced picture of India. We are not likely to get much help from the American media.

-Courtesy The Dartmouth

Doctors facing moral dilemma

The *New England Journal of Medicine* is warning that doctors are facing yet another moral dilemma.

It centers around a new test called amniocentesis (am-nee-o-sen-tee-sis). Originally, the test was developed to detect birth defects in unborn children. But it can also determine the sex of the fetus. And now doctors say a small number of pregnant women have requested amniocentesis to find out if their unborn child is the "right" sex. If it's not, the women often seek abortion.

Currently, most doctors and hospitals refuse to perform amniocentesis solely to determine sex on moral grounds. But now, Dr. John C. Fletcher is asking the medical profession to reverse its position. He says he made this decision "with great difficulty", but finally concluded that "it's a woman's right to decide her reproductive future." And he adds,

Pet crude oil?

Pet rocks are gone and skateboards are fading fast - so what's next? Jars of Mexican crude oil, according to Charles Rogers of Port Isabel, Texas. Rogers, a pharmacist, has been collecting the sludge as it washes up on Texas beaches, and says he's already sold about a hundred jars for two bucks apiece.

What's he calling the sticky stuff? Why "Oil of Ole", of course.

"if she's going to seek this procedure and an abortion anyway, she should at least be able to get the very best medical care."

Fletcher stresses that this is only a small problem now, but expects it to become a major one in just a few years, as more and more obstetricians learn to perform amniocentesis in their offices. (Newsprint)

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