
Navigating ‘we are like that only’ India

Last week, the “when exactly is Diwali” confusion swept through many parts of the country, with the Amavasya that marks the main day spilling into two calendar days. A charming Diwali greetings video from the French embassy (though who can be sure these days of the provenance of anything digital) was a humorous take on this, with the suggestion that both days be celebration days and the chief of mission saying “whether it’s on the 20th or 21st of October, the lights of Diwali always shine bright”.

This columnist, who has been trying to explain India to overseas companies for ages — that “we are like that only, deal with it” — was pleasantly surprised and gratified to see the world adjusting to us. Decades ago, a visiting chief executive office of a global children’s entertainment company had asked, “When do children come home from school in India?” And as he heard the “it all depends” answer, he snapped, “Surely that is a simple question to answer simply.”

Women power

A manager of a small farm in rural Maharashtra said he needed to take a loan of ₹two lakh to pay for his son’s wedding. When asked why the girl’s side was not the one spending, as is the usual Indian custom, he said, “*Aajkal paise ke bina log ladki dene ko taiyaar nahin haini.*” When quizzed further about this reversal of convention, he asked, “Where are the girls nowadays?” The sex ratio at birth in Maharashtra in 2001-03 was an average of 883 and 879 in 2004-06, so the cohort of marriageable age is facing a shortage of girls.

For consumption watchers, the west and the south of India, led by Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu are “progressive” markets — again underscoring the need to not equate consumption health with societal

health. More interesting is that it is not gender equality and social enlightenment that phases out practices like dowry or equivalents in gifts, but the reverse that causes role reversals! Added to that, the reservations for women, preferences in jobs, and social benefits in their name make them, so to speak, more valuable.

Infra power

Our new infrastructure is a definite physical upgrade over the old, but it seems to come with its own challenges. As much as bus commuters in Mumbai complain about the humidity that saps their energy, they also complain about the new air-conditioned buses — “*Signal par nahin utar sakte hain, darwaza band rehta hai, door bus stop se chalna padta hai, dhoop mein!*” That said, there is no doubt that better infrastructure makes people more productive and is the quicker, more doable fix to increasing labour productivity that economists keep telling us is essential for economic growth, compared to the longer haul of formalising the informal sector, which drives productivity through better working conditions, better equipment and wider networks of complementary skills working together in a structured way.

Relentlessly improving physical infrastructure the way digital infrastructure has become ubiquitous and affordable to most is the best productivity booster. Forget the “all or nothing” mentality that many well-heeled citizens have — their view often is that if the entry and exit points to spanking new freeways are unchanged and choked then the efficiency gains of the freeways are negated. Of course, it is entirely reasonable for citizens to expect more holistic and thoughtful planning from road departments. How-



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ever, despite the shortcomings, a taxi driver going from, say, Mumbai to Nasik gets 80 km of an easy drive with no signals and no worries about living beings running across the road or driving through a winding, arduous ghat section. It gives him the time and energy to fit in a few more earning hours of driving in a day. Force is defined as “mass x acceleration” and the force of change in India comes from a large mass moving with slow acceleration. Every bit of improvement — metros, high-speed trains, better roads, improved living facilities, and public and private amenities — helps those in the informal economy of self-employed or own-account workers become more productive and earn better.

Vive le difference

A delivery man attached to a local courier platform in a big city did the “we are like that only” thing. He offered to disintermediate the platform and said a WhatsApp to him or his brother before specific times was all that was needed (presumably they both had other “day jobs” as well). He would charge less than the platform and because they knew the city well, customers would be saved the bother of filling out the detailed “how to get there” instructions that platform apps demand and endless phone calls seeking directions. Even on the most premium household services platforms, the men often try to disintermediate the platform, using it merely to find good customers whom they can then take over. Interestingly, however, the women don’t do that. They say they value the dignity and respectability the platform gives them, as well as the flexibility and support systems it offers, which enables them to manage their outside work and homework balance better.

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