
Letters from Readers

India Watch

TO THE EDITOR:

Sadanand Dhume has done an excellent job updating the status of the often complex relationship between India and the U.S., and he gives reason to believe that the countries' shared democratic values will bring them closer in the coming years ["Is India an Ally?," January].

Politically, however, the key question is what each country seeks from the other. India's economy may come to equal America's in size by 2050, but India will never be a serious contender as a "global superpower" the way Great Britain used to be or China aspires to be. India is basically a mercantile nation that has no designs on a grand partnership with any military power other than for protecting its own domain. For two millennia India was invaded, scavenged, colonized, and broken up, only to rise again without any heightened

sense of nationalism or interest in influencing geopolitics.

Americans should not expect India to be a reliable ally if that means linking up in the global chess game of superpower diplomacy. India may acquire or develop sophisticated weapons systems, including nuclear-tipped intercontinental ballistic missiles, but historically its outlook has never gone beyond its own neighborhood, where it expects to be treated as the prime regional power. Indeed, the friction between the U.S. and India in the past was driven by America's attempts to play "zero-sum games" in the Indian subcontinent.

There is talk today of India serving as a counterweight to China; this, in my view, is futile. Nor should one look to India to settle America's political differences with Iran. These two civilizations have been dealing with each other long before most Western nations

even existed, and it is unrealistic to expect that their relationship would evaporate because that is the "right thing to do" at the moment.

If, on the other hand, the effort is about promoting commerce, providing aid to poorer countries, advancing democracy and the rule of law, and working multilaterally to reduce global threats ranging from weapons of mass destruction to terrorism to emerging biological challenges, I believe the U.S. will find a willing ally in India.

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TO THE EDITOR:

Sadanand Dhume is right to ask whether Washington's new love affair with New Delhi is premature, given India's history of "non-alignment," its lingering post-colonial sensibilities, and its inability (to date) to take advantage of the Bush administration's

generous civilian nuclear deal. Should Manmohan Singh's government ultimately fail to deliver its end of the nuclear bargain, the next occupant of the White House will think twice before investing much new political capital in the U.S.-India relationship.

Mr. Dhume should also be commended for dispensing with the notion that India is immune to Islamist extremism because of the quality of its democratic institutions. If the smallest fraction of India's Muslim minority views terrorism as a legitimate political tool, India will face a heightened security threat from transnational Islamist groups. But even though India's Muslim community is in fact more prone to radicalization than boosters like Thomas Friedman are willing to admit, Mr. Dhume overstates its political power, particularly in the realm of foreign policy. It is hard to discern the "enormous influence" of Muslim vot-

ers in New Delhi's policies toward Israel and the United States, or even, for that matter, toward Iran. In each instance, perceived national interests—military, political, and economic—weigh more heavily.

Nor are India's socialists quite the menace Mr. Dhume identifies them as. The leftism of intellectuals like Arundhati Roy and the Left Front parties that have temporarily stalled the U.S.-India nuclear deal is actually losing its popular appeal and its ideological coherence in the face of India's growing economy. Just as in neighboring China, the ruling "Communists" in Indian states like West Bengal have essentially dumped the economic policies of the past in order to court foreign investment and pursue rapid growth.

It is true—and unfortunate—that New Delhi's more ideologically driven leftists have stymied Prime Minister Singh's latest efforts at economic reform. But this fact says more about the weakness of his Congress party than about the Communists' strength. Today the defining dynamic of Indian politics is the decay of Congress and the emergence of regional parties. In this devolution of electoral power, the leftists have maximized their limited leverage by playing between the seams of the governing coalition and the opposition led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). But the Left Front's tactical maneuvers, however successful in the near term, are unlikely to translate into lasting gains.

In sum, the roadblocks to India's continued ascent (and the ascent of the U.S.-India partnership) are less

likely to be ideological or religious, as Mr. Dhume argues, than structural. Weak local and national institutions have compromised India's capacity to move ahead with economic reforms and ambitious foreign-policy undertakings. For an aspiring global power, India has thus far underinvested in the tools required to support world-class policymaking, such as higher education in the social sciences, research centers, and a robust, highly trained foreign service.

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TO THE EDITOR:

Sadanand Dhume's cogent and timely essay is a useful corrective to a certain irrational exuberance about India's growth prospects and its supposed willingness to cast its lot with the United States after years of pursuing pseudo-socialist economic policies and "non-aligned" foreign policies. His discussion of the politics of India's Muslim minority is refreshingly forthright. Still, I would note a few instances in which he overstates his case.

While Mr. Dhume is correct that India still suffers from a plethora of economic woes, including endemic poverty, the statistics he cites tell only part of the story. The main story is that India's fitful embrace of a market-oriented strategy of economic growth has contributed to a dramatic reduction in both urban and rural poverty. In 1991, close to 33 percent of the population was below the official poverty line. Today that figure has declined to 26 percent. When one considers that the national population has grown in the same peri-

od from 850 million to 1.3 billion, the achievement is nothing short of stunning. Sustained economic growth, which now hovers at around 9 percent, coupled with investment in public health and primary education, could contribute to still more rapid alleviation of poverty.

At another level, Mr. Dhume overstates the political influence of left-wing Indian intellectuals. To be sure, many of them hold Luddite views of industrialization, remain viscerally anti-American, and are given to political bombast. But they command a small, declining audience within India, and are more likely to win accolades among fashionably left-wing faculty of elite American universities than among the Indian electorate. (Needless to say, their disdain for America generally stops short of refusing lucrative fellowships on American campuses.)

Mr. Dhume also fails adequately to appreciate the sea change that has come about in India's foreign policy. Even though the BJP and the Communists have placed the Indo-U.S. civilian nuclear deal in jeopardy, U.S.-India relations are better today than they have been in the past 60 years. The two countries now share significant political, economic, and diplomatic interests. Even feckless American support for the duplicitous Musharraf regime in Pakistan has not undermined this.

In this context, Mr. Dhume's criticism of India's highly calibrated relationship with Iran is off the mark, the reprehensible Ahmadinejad notwithstanding. Contrary to his assessment, India's reasons for engaging Iran are strictly pragmatic. Shiite Iran serves as a coun-

terweight to Sunni Pakistan, is a major supplier of natural gas, and helps ensure the political quiescence of India's substantial Shiite community. As Indian policymakers are wont to underscore, Washington for its part has few qualms about maintaining a robust relationship with Saudi Arabia, a state known for populist anti-Americanism and unremitting hostility toward Israel.

SUMIT GANGULY
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TO THE EDITOR:

Sadanand Dhume gets a number of things squarely right. India's economic progress has been overhyped (though largely by Western observers who, having caught up with the China story too late, overtook the India story too early), and by no means is it at the cusp of economic superpowerdom. If India plays its cards right, by the middle of the century its people will lead the lives of citizens in an emergent middle-rich country.

Mr. Dhume is also right to raise the question of radical Islam's reach in India. The columnist Thomas Friedman and President Bush have inadvertently done India a disservice by praising it as a country of "150 million Muslims, not one of whom is a member of al Qaeda." Enough individual Indian Muslims outside Jammu and Kashmir have been identified as members of or sympathizers with Lashkar-e-Toiba, al Qaeda's first cousin, and recent investigations into bombings in Glasgow and Barcelona have revealed that Indian Muslims are not im-

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immune to the toxic appeal of international jihad. When Westerners downplay this, they only encourage those in Indian politics who prefer to ignore the problem.

I part company with Mr. Dhume, however, on a number of points. Contrary to what he suggests, we should not expect India to identify absolutely with America's foreign policy. The present world environment is very different from the black-and-white bipolarity of the cold war, when an alliance meant absolute conformity. Nor is the sort of big-bang economic deregulation that many former East-bloc countries have been comfortable with necessarily the right template for Indian society.

Next, analysts in Washington are often remarkably (or deliberately) ignorant of the interplay between India's domestic politics and its foreign policy. Mr. Dhume, for his part, seems to speak of a federal government that is an omnipotent monolith with complete functional autonomy. In truth, the government in New Delhi is a coalition of often conflicting political forces. A sweeping question like "Is India an ally?" makes little sense with respect to India's heterogeneous polity. It would be more prudent to ask: "Which Indian constituencies/parties/states are allies?"

Between India's white-collar middle class and its younger political leaders—

who, over the coming years, are likely to succeed the old-timers that are (in Mr. Dhume's phrase) "tethered to the bullock cart"—America is not without allies. Yet the U.S. State Department confines its overtures to the foreign-service bureaucracy and punditocracy in New Delhi, and snubs genuine allies—like Narendra Modi, chief minister of Gujarat—who share America's ideas about security and economics.

Finally, let us not be too hasty with history's timetable. Between the Spanish-American War and Pearl Harbor, the United States took 50 years to decide whether it was isolationist or interventionist, comfortable behind its twin moats—tethered, as it were,

to the Pony Express—or a global superpower. Give India at least half that time.

ASHOK MALIK

The Indian Express
New Delhi, India

TO THE EDITOR:

Sadanand Dhume writes: "Until India is able to view itself and its history dispassionately, [and] reject the twin failures of socialism and non-alignment, . . . it will likely remain an under-achiever."

An opportunity for such a demonstration has arrived. In January, India's supreme court ordered the government to respond to a petition questioning the propriety of the word "socialist" in the preamble of the national constitution.

As B.R. Ambedkar, one

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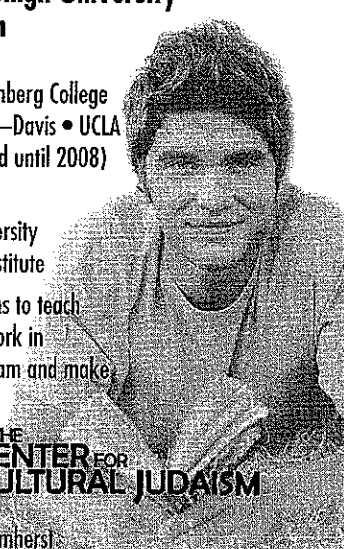
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of India's founding fathers, wrote in 1948:

[How] society should be organized in its social and economic side are matters which must be decided by the people themselves according to time and circumstances. It cannot be laid down in the constitution itself, because that is destroying democracy altogether. . . . It is perfectly possible . . . for thinking people to devise some other form . . . which might be better than the socialist organization.

The Constituent Assembly agreed with Ambedkar, and the Indian people chose to call themselves a "sovereign, democratic republic." But Indira Gandhi amend-

ed the constitution in the mid-1970's during the Emergency, and inserted the "socialist" clause.

Appearing for the petitioners earlier this month, Fali Nariman also asked the court to do away with the socialist vow that is required of political parties by the Election Commission. "It is hypocritical to say that you believe in it when you don't," he said. "One can always have a political party that has capitalism as its intent, and why not?" The bench, headed by Chief Justice K.G. Balakrishnan, raised the following question: "Why do you define socialism in the narrow sense, as the Communists do? . . . Why don't you go by the broader definition, . . . which mandates that the state ensure social-

welfare measures for all citizens?"

The answer, of course, is that we must use words in a clear and precise way. Ever since Marx, "socialism" has meant the "public ownership of the means of production." Most Indians do not subscribe to this ideology anymore. Jawaharlal Nehru's intentions were good when he set out to establish socialism in the 1950's, but the results were anything but. The poor suffered disproportionately as the state forcibly acquired farmland. State control of industry brought "License Raj," a system of patronage that utterly corrupted Indian society.

The recent challenge in the supreme court presents an opportunity for India's

rulers to come forth and publicly acknowledge some of the mistakes of our past. Until we do that, we will indeed continue to perform below our potential.

GURCHARAN DAS
New Delhi, India

SADANAND DHUME
writes:

Since I have no profound argument with my distinguished correspondents on the big picture—it is agreed that India's economy and the India-U.S. relationship are in better shape than ever before—I am left in the happy position of quibbling over details.

Where I depart most sharply from the majority view of India-watchers is on the question of New Delhi's relationship with Tehran.



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Vijay K. Sazawal's point about the deep civilizational ties between India and Iran and Sumit Ganguly's observation that Indian policy is driven more by realpolitik than by domestic political considerations have much to commend them. It is a fact that India's cultural, linguistic, and economic links with Iran date back to antiquity. The importance of Iran's role as a Shiite power on Pakistan's western border, and its willingness to give India the access to Afghanistan and central Asia that Islamabad denies, should not be underestimated.

The thrust of my argument, however, was not to dismiss legitimate Indian interests but to point out that these make India a much less reliable partner of the U.S. than it is often considered. No doubt America's failure to halt the global proliferation of Sunni extremism—as embodied by its foremost state sponsors, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan—mirrors India's listless approach to the Shiite extremism represented by the mullahs of Iran. But modern India's compact with Islamic obscurantism, which dates back to Mohandas Gandhi's peculiar call more than 80 years ago to forge Hindu-Muslim unity by protesting the abolition of the Turkish caliphate, makes it unlikely that either Washington or New Delhi will come around to the other's view any time soon. Such fundamental differences do not reliable partners make.

Against this light, it is impossible for me to agree with Daniel Markey's assessment that India's Muslim community has little power in the realm of foreign policy. Why else did India wait un-

til 1992 to establish diplomatic relations with Israel, and why, even today, must their interactions take place away from the public eye? Domestic Muslim sentiment has never been too far from the sights of Indian policymakers, and the capacity of this sentiment to mar the promise of India-U.S. relations remains sadly all too real.

As for the role of leftists in India's public discourse, and by extension in its public policy, Messrs. Markey and Ganguly and Ashok Malik are right to emphasize their declining fortunes, especially among the young. (Mr. Markey's observation about the newfound business sense of West Bengal's Communists is especially apt.) Still, it remains undeniable, as Gurcharan Das has eloquently shown in his classic *India Unbound*, that India has failed to acknowledge fully the price it paid for persisting with socialism for so many decades. When one considers the fractured nature of the country's polity, it is not hard to imagine scenarios in which it could regress to a harmful populism, if not to full-blown statism.

Stem Cells

TO THE EDITOR:

Jay P. Lefkowitz's account of President Bush's deliberations on his embryonic stem-cell-research policy is a valuable contribution to the historical record, but his wholesale charge that the scientific community was morally unserious in its deliberations is disappointing ["Stem Cells and the President," January].

If Mr. Lefkowitz has not heard of the sensitivity of scientists to the moral questions raised by the creation and destruction of embryonic cells, it can only be because he has not listened. Contrary to what he suggests, the biologist James Thomson is on record paying heed to the ethical quandaries long before they were supposedly rendered moot by recent scientific discoveries. At least two federal commissions in the 1990's examined the moral dilemmas in detail, hearing testimony from numerous theologians. In 2005, a committee I co-chaired for the National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine issued a report with a whole chapter devoted to the moral status of the human embryo.

An irony of the President's reasoning seems to have eluded Mr. Lefkowitz. He cites an observation of the bioethicist Leon Kass in a crucial White House meeting that if one funds research on stem cells that have *already* been extracted from embryos (as opposed to creating embryos in order to extract their cells), one is "not complicit in their destruction." Had the President actually acted on this dictum, he would have preserved President Clinton's policy, which approved funding for research on embryonic stem-cell lines but not for the derivation of such lines. Instead, President Bush established a policy that, as Mr. Lefkowitz notes, created an arbitrary moral boundary that satisfied neither side of the debate, and left his administration in a "defensive crouch."

Mr. Lefkowitz suggests that the moral debate has been ended by the recent

papers on induced pluripotency—i.e., a technique that allows, without the destruction of human embryos, the creation of stem cells that are identical to those taken from embryos. But if he had listened to the scientists who made the discovery, he would have learned that in order to make the technique safe and reliable, embryonic stem-cell lines will still be needed for many years.

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TO THE EDITOR:

It was refreshing to learn from Jay P. Lefkowitz that the President's approach to embryonic stem cells was driven by genuine ethical concerns. This is not something that can be said of every participant in the debate. There were many in the pro-choice camp who were eager to use the stem-cell issue as a surrogate in the abortion wars. Until stem cells came on the scene, pro-lifers maintained an advantage in imagery: a mid- or late-term fetus looks very much like a newborn baby. The medical hopes for embryonic stem cells pitted the earliest embryos—microscopic blobs—against articulate, compelling spokesmen of human suffering like the actor Michael J. Fox.

Thus arose a partnership of politicians, eager to tap pro-choice votes, with leading scientists who touted the potential of stem cells to provide new therapies for a wide range of chronic conditions. But the credibility of the scientists' promise may be questioned. For years, we have heard that identifying the mutations re-