

Dear friends, Hope you are all well and enjoying the arrival of spring. It is my pleasure to write to you in an effort to keep in touch amid all the busy activities of our life.

It is election season in India and lately many of my thoughts have been about India and this email reflects that. If you are an Indian citizen I hope you would consider voting for the Aam Aadmi party. I am very excited by the possibility of a change in India's politics and social life every aspect of which is rife with corruption. Arvind Kejriwal is still not seasoned as a politician and it is unclear how they would do in the elections but as far as I am concerned voting for anyone else would be a vote to continue the same kind of politics. Many of the workers and nominees of this party are lifelong social workers sincerely dedicated to improving the lives of people and I personally know some of them. Regardless of the results I am gratified by the knowledge that they have committed themselves to fighting for change in the political arena for the long term. Click [here](#) for a no holds barred unscripted and fascinating online grilling of Kejriwal by young voters.

Meanwhile in the Persian Gulf the mistreatment of workers from South Asia, Philippines and African countries continues. My friend and colleague Francois Ramarosan forwarded me this [story](#) about working conditions at the construction sites for FIFA world cup 2018 in Qatar. In it the British Labour party's shadow international development secretary Jim Murphy has said that football associations should put pressure on Qatar to improve the "sub-human" working conditions of thousands of migrant labourers. Thanks to all of you signed my [petition](#) to stop this treatment! If you have not had a chance to do it please consider signing it. The conditions are really dire. I still need 25 signatures before move-on would consider promoting it.

Thanks for your patient reading and your friendship! I look forward to hearing from you.

Sankar

Random Thoughts (103)

4/15/2014

1. (3/22) All my life I have been wondering why India got into the state that it is now, and how the western people developed at least in the material sphere so much more than the easterners. It was not always thus. Until middle ages eastern civilizations were as advanced as the western ones in every way. In fact many of the modern scientific concepts had their beginnings in the East, notably algebra and the decimal system. Many books have been written about what led to the rapid rise and dominant position of the West. My particular concern, as it is that of many other Indians, is why our homeland decayed so much. The older I grow and the farther I am from India, the more clearly I am able to see the problems that I couldn't see because I was drowning in them. I can also see the great strengths and gifts of India that I wasn't aware of because I took them for granted and had not seen a society without those assets.

One obvious answer is health and nutrition. From a young age I have been trying to live a healthier life and eat more nutritious food. My dad always would make fun of me for that and tell me to eat like a normal person. I do think he had a point, in that it is not just what you eat. A lot of it is about how well the food is digested and that in turns depends on how tasty it is. But is not all about taste either. I think it really is about how active and energetic the mind is. At some point during our civilization, perhaps in the middle ages, the average Indian's diet became less nutritious and the average Indian less active and energetic. Perhaps both feed into each other -- it is futile to argue which came first. When the mind is strong through a healthy, active body and the thinking is clear and energetic then one is able to develop new ideas and accomplish great things in the world. I can see it in my own life. As I train myself both physically and mentally to be stronger and healthier my thinking becomes more coherent and I can see my own weaknesses and strengths clearly. I was blessed with the gift of resilience, tenacity and diligence that so many Indians have, from my parents. Especially those of the working and middle class. But now I see that it is also important to have energy, rigor and focus on the task at hand in order to think and plan well and act effectively. I don't think I am lazy but one needs them more consistently.

Another oft quoted reason is the philosophy and religion. Indian philosophy supposedly promotes passivity, teaches that the world is an illusion and that everything is preordained by one's karma in the past life and so on. Indian religion is considered backward, full of superstitions and promoting decadence by many Westerners. Leave aside the beauty and complexity of the Hindu religion (as described in Wendy Doniger's "The Hindus" and other books) or philosophy (see S. Radhakrishnan's "Indian Philosophy" or the books by Max Muller, Alan Watts, Huston Smith, Karen Armstrong, among others). The fact is that Hinduism and Buddhism teach us to look deeply into the real nature of life and our self and if you think about it even a little bit you realize that most of the time in life we drift about without thinking about the meaning of it all. Ultimately, as Krishna says in the Gita, both inactivity and attachment to one's action are impediments to understanding life and advancing beyond the material mundane existence. The decadence and stagnation in Indian society happened not because of the philosophy but because we moved away from the true essence of the philosophy to a superficial, mechanical interpretation of it. The vigor and intensity of the search for truth continues among the spiritually restless but there are too many charlatans misleading the masses in the quest for their own power.

Another answer could lie in opportunity. Perhaps opportunity was limited in India. Perhaps Indians should have ventured out more. Perhaps Indian society and tradition had become too rigid and stagnant and that permeated all aspects of life limiting what people did with their life, confining them to a stifling regimen of family, duty and rituals. Perhaps life in India had become too easy, devoid of challenges.

One could go on and on. I am sure I will write more about this in the future. When things go bad, they do so for many varied reasons and they all feed into each other. But the strengths of India are also clear as is the path to a bright future. Its strength lies in its people, especially the young ones. It is also in its traditions which if followed purposefully with a good understanding of the reasons behind them can enrich India. The path to improvement lies in improving the basic

health, nutrition and a good solid education that equips people for life rather than just rote learning. Once these are established others will follow. A strong body and mind can deal with the challenges of society such as corruption, exploitation and injustice. It can see clearly the solutions to the problems and then execute them with determination. It will take time but that is the only way. No one person or one idea can change India overnight. Also as AID (association for India's development) says in its motto, "Interconnected problems require interconnected solutions." Ultimately one has to start somewhere. To me, that place is with the health, nutrition and education of young people. In fact I think India can be a beacon for a more peaceful and sustainable world (see also #10 below).

2. (3/25) The more I live the more it seems to me that all relationships among men involve some kind of power dynamics. It seems to me our primitive instincts of domination by alpha males passed on from our simian ancestors is just too hard to shake off. There are many men who are blessed with a calm and friendly disposition. There are others who could train themselves to behave that way. But too many men spend too much time trying to prove that they are bigger than the other guy. Whether it is sports or politics or academia or even religion they don't seem to be able to separate their thoughts from their testosterone. When you look at it as Buddha would you can dismiss it as all part of the game of life, neither good nor bad. Perhaps there is some evolutionary benefit to society coming out of this kind of male behavior as well. But at a mortal level it is painful to deal with.

3. (3/28) The car dealership DarCars has a new advertisement in which they mention a "Lifetime Relationship Warranty." Don't know how it works but apparently they guarantee that you will be always happy with your experience with them. It makes me think about the other lifetime relationship warranty, namely marriage. Wedding vows are but a formal acceptance of this warranty. It makes it sound unexciting, but romance cannot be sustained without a lifetime commitment and hard work to back it up.

4. (3/28) These days I frequently worry about what I have achieved in life or rather the lack of such achievement. I have tried to live truthfully and I hope done some good to other people. Once I got to my thirties, I slowly lost my ambition for achieving things for myself and spent more time in trying to build relationships and in volunteering and service. But I wonder if I should have put goal setting and achieving ahead of such things. On second thoughts it seems to me without truth and love, without mindfulness and compassion, nothing that we achieve will matter. Because all life is moving toward the goal of enlightenment and understanding the true nature of everything. We have evolved from single cells to this level of consciousness so as to reach that goal. We need to lay the foundation for our children and other living beings to continue towards that goal. If we leave out that foundation, and do not live truthfully and with compassion for all, then even if we spend all our life trying to do good for the world it will mean nothing.

5. (4/1) As you mature you realize that life is a web, a drama, a game all at the same time. A web of interconnected actions and actors. A drama in which each one has a role. A game to be played with seriousness, yet knowing that it is only a game and it will end at some point. An endless game is meaningless. "Good" and "Evil", "Prey" and "Predator" each cannot exist without the other. The actions of evil give birth to the actions of good and they keep each other in balance. The forest needs in its natural cycle of life both the nourishing rain and the destructive fire.

6. (4/7) I don't know if it is just me but it seems to me most religious teachers preach what their followers want to hear. It takes someone of great integrity and spiritual maturity to tell people the truth as they see it. I think Thich Nhat Hanh, Dalai Lama and Pope Francis are such leaders.

7. (4/7) My vision for education in this age of online everything is for teachers to become more like coaches. I know many of my students would do much better if I spend more time with them. But that is hard to do in a class of 20 or 30 students, especially when I also

have to do all the teaching, grading, etc., If a lot of the routine teaching and testing can be done online or in computer labs then I can focus my lectures on some key fundamentals and enlightening applications, historical background, etc., and also have more time to coach the students individually.

8. (4/8) Recently I saw a video about a boy in Sierra Leone named Kelvin Doe who was able to build a small radio station on his own using parts that he salvaged. He calls himself DJ Focus. He says if you focus, then you can do anything perfectly. How true! Apparently his next project is to build a windmill for his village. The secret to achieving and creating things in life is hard work combined with a focus on what one is doing. This creates joy and a feeling of fulfillment leading to a virtuous cycle of positive energy.

9. (4/12) I just read a wide ranging and well written [article about Narendra Modi](http://caravanmagazine.in/reportage/emperor-uncrowned?page=0,0) :<http://caravanmagazine.in/reportage/emperor-uncrowned?page=0,0>

It worries me deeply that this man could become the next Prime Minister of India. I don't know what kind of person he is inside or what he will do, if he does indeed become the leader of the country. People have been blinded by his leadership skills because we haven't had a strong leader since Indira Gandhi. I hope India has grown up beyond that stage. We do not want a Stalin, Hitler, Saddam Hussein or even a Putin to come to power. People are also blinded by his ability to get things done and build factories and infrastructure and remove corruption. All sorely needed in India. Some of his achievements are genuine but if one takes away the public relations campaign one sees that in truth it is more hype than reality. Besides, for me what is important is how all people have benefited, not just the industrialists and the well-off. If Gandhi were alive and saw what is happening in his own state of Gujarat and the country as a whole he would be aghast. I can only hope and pray for the best, whoever comes to power. One silver lining for me is that no matter what happens the Aam Aadmi Party in which many of my friends from the Association for India's Development have volunteered and even are fighting in the election has emerged as a national force. In the long run I hope they grow and become a major player in the national

government, while building a grassroots movement that inspires young people to work for the common good.

10. (4/12) Capitalism is ultimately about salesmanship. It is about getting others to believe that by doing things for you they will be getting something for themselves. Now what you sell can be truly beneficial to them or it can be something they want but would only end up harming them. And you can either make it a fair exchange or set up the system so that you get more out of it than the people who work for you. So all depends on how it is practised. As I have written before in these RTs, the capitalism practised by some in this country is not much better than cannibalism. On the other hand people like Mahatma Gandhi and Thoreau wanted a society in which people help each other, produce and use only what they need for a very basic and simple existence. In this society personal development and happiness would be valued more. Building such a society is more of a spiritual endeavour. It takes a certain level of intellectual and character development for people to understand and live it. Eventually, hopefully, all humanity would reach that level. Or perhaps our greed and lust for material pleasures would end up destroying us as a species. The latest IPCC report on climate change seems to indicate that we are on the path to do that. Nature and our earth will do fine in the long run, although many of today's species will go extinct. But the report should be of great concern to anyone who cares about people, especially those in poor countries and islands everywhere. But as I said in #4 above, I think all life is moving toward the goal of enlightenment and we have evolved from single cells to this level of consciousness so as to reach that goal. I firmly believe that we will move toward a society as dreamed by the Mahatma and other great souls. I think India can lead the world in creating such a just, peaceful and sustainable society that lives in harmony with nature.