

How India Became America

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Another brick has come down in the great wall separating India from the rest of the world. Recently, both Starbucks and Amazon announced that they would be entering the Indian market. Amazon has already started a comparison shopping site; Starbucks plans to open its first outlet this summer.

As one Indian newspaper put it, this could be “the final stamp of globalization.”

5 For me, though, the arrival of these two companies, so emblematic of American consumerism, and so emblematic, too, of the West Coast techie culture that has infiltrated India’s own booming technology sector, is a sign of something more distinctive. It signals the latest episode in India’s remarkable process of Americanization.

10 I grew up in rural India, the son of an Indian father and American mother. [...] For much of my life, my two homes were literally — but also culturally, socially and experientially — on opposite sides of the planet.

All that began changing in the early 1990s, when India liberalized its economy. Since then, I’ve watched India’s transformation with exhilaration, but occasionally, and increasingly,
15 with some anxiety.

I left for boarding school in America in 1991. By the time I graduated from high school, two years later, Indian cities had filled with shopping malls and glass-paneled office buildings. In the countryside, thatch huts had given way to concrete homes, and cashew and mango plantations were being replaced by gated communities. In both city and country, a newly
20 liberated population was indulging in a frenzy (some called it an orgy) of consumerism and self-expression.

More than half a century ago, R. K. Narayan, that great chronicler of India in simpler times, wrote about his travels in America. “America and India are profoundly different in attitude and philosophy,” he wrote. “Indian philosophy stresses austerity and unencumbered,
25 uncomplicated day-to-day living. America’s emphasis, on the other hand, is on material acquisition and the limitless pursuit of prosperity.” By the time I decided to return to India for good, in 2003, Narayan’s observations felt outdated. A great reconciliation had taken place; my two homes were no longer so far apart.

This reconciliation — this Americanization of India — had both tangible and intangible
30 manifestations. The tangible signs included an increase in the availability of American

brands; a noticeable surge in the population of American businessmen (and their booming voices) in the corridors of five-star hotels; and, also, a striking use of American idiom and American accents. In outsourcing companies across the country, Indians were being taught to speak more slowly and stretch their O's. I found myself turning my head (and wincing a little) when I heard young Indians call their colleagues "dude."

But the intangible evidence of Americanization was even more remarkable. Something had changed in the very spirit of the country. The India in which I grew up was, in many respects, an isolated and dour place of limited opportunity. The country was straitjacketed by its moralistic rejection of capitalism, by a lethargic and often depressive fatalism.

Now it is infused with an energy, a can-do ambition and an entrepreneurial spirit that I can only describe as distinctly American. In surveys of global opinion, Indians consistently rank as among the most optimistic people in the world. Bookstores are stacked with titles like "India Arriving," "India Booms" and "The Indian Renaissance." The Pew Global Attitudes Project, which measures opinions across major countries, regularly finds that Indians admire values and attributes typically thought of as American: free-market capitalism, globalization, even multinational companies. Substantial majorities associate Americans with values like hard work and inventiveness, and even during the Iraq war, India's views of America remained decidedly positive.

I HAVE learned, though, that the nation's new American-style prosperity is a more complex, and certainly more ambivalent, phenomenon than it first appears. The villages around my home have undeniably grown more prosperous, but they are also more troubled. Abandoned fields and fallow plantations are indications of a looming agricultural and environmental crisis. Ancient social structures are collapsing under the weight of new money. Bonds of caste and religion and family have frayed; the panchayats, village assemblies made up of elders, have lost their traditional authority. Often, lawlessness and violence step into the vacuum left behind.

[...] India's Americanization has in so many ways been a wonderful thing. It has lifted millions from poverty, and, by seeding ideas of meritocracy and individual attainment into the national imagination, it has begun the process of dismantling an old and often repressive order. More and more, though, I find myself lying awake at night, worrying about what will take the place of that order. The American promise of renewal and reinvention is deeply seductive — but, as I have learned since coming back home, it is also profoundly menacing.

Annotations:

⁷ **West Coast techie culture** – refers to the West Coast of the USA where many important computer companies are located

¹⁹ **gated communities** – an area surrounded by a fence or wall and protected by a guarded

entrance

²² **R. K. Narayan** – (1906 – 2001) well-known Indian novelist

⁴⁷ **Iraq war** – armed conflict in Iraq between 2003 and 2011, which triggered world-wide anti-American protests