

The Indian Economy and the Caste System

“So, what’s that- caste system thing- how’s that affecting the Indian economy?” Asked a friend- a more regular gym goer than me, I must say- as he sat there huffing at the arm crunching machine, and the ongoing buzz of conversation settled momentarily on the amazingly fast growth of the current Indian economy. What got the topic started was the strange surrealism of the current American economy and everyday life that *seems* to stay unaffected while hundreds of thousands of people in Iraq lie dead or displaced from normal human relationships and basic necessities on the other side.

So, what’s new, you say- haven’t we been standing on bridges holding vigils for the past, god knows how many years, but it’s done nothing, has it? Those things on the other side of the world, well, they’re just too damn far, (you mutter, hoping that the distance is really, truly far, given the current state of affairs.) And our White house, well, it might just be on Pluto-. Where’s my darn coffee and that crossword puzzle?

Well, many things happen to lie on the other side of the world from us, out of our regular frequency range. And one of them is the vast subcontinent of India, bursting full with a billion people in a land-size that’s approximately one-third of the United States, and has a population density ten times ours. However, India’s current GDP growth is at 7.6% to that of ours, pegged at 3.5%. Well, that must be getting them over there, pretty rich, shouldn’t it, what with all those jobs being outsourced there, you grumble, as you slash your way through another of those difficult crosswords.

It does appear so- in the frenzied construction that covers every inch of New Delhi at a feverish pace, uprooting the last dust covered trees that had survived as the lone memoirs of the lush, green Delhi of just about two to three decades ago. Well, with an official population of 15 million and a land size that’s about 1,500 square kilometers, compared to that of the entire 1.3 million population of Maine that encompasses an area of 90,000 square kilometers- that should be no surprise.

But, just in case you have visions of yourself pushing through walls of people from one tip of India to another, you may let yourself loose of them. The walls thin down and spread out into farms and fields and hills and mountains and rivers and small towns and villages as you move away from the major cities.

So, what does it all have to do with economy? It’s doing great, isn’t it?

To uphold an old cliché, the cover doesn’t tell the whole story; however, it does tell a big part of it. So, the Indian economy is really going great guns, and the middle class of India, (approximately equal to the entire population of United States,) is hugely benefiting from it. Monthly salaries of start up college graduates from the best universities now start at, what was and still is the yearly salary of many, and yet- 30 percent of India lives below the poverty line.

In India, poverty line means abject poverty- no social security, no soup kitchens, no shelters- nothing. And a huge component of this poverty line stems from the 3000 year old Hindu caste system, which over the last thousand years became so rigid as to prohibit all social and economic mobility, from one occupation into another, from one social and economic strata into another, especially for the lowest caste.

Due to which, some can only clean sewers and latrines and not even drink water from the same wells as the upper castes. Where cobblers have to remain cobblers, except

in cities, where one can't tell the caste of one person from another because of the sheer number of people coming from outside.

And yet, the last president of India was from the lowest caste, and the current, a leading Space Scientist from the minority Muslim community, determined to take India into the developed world. So, to cross India's economy with its leading drawbacks and criticisms is like sending a balloon into the air and waiting for it to burst- or not.