

BOOK REVIEW - 1

GAMES INDIANS PLAY :

Why we are the way we are

V. Raghunathan

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Although this is a book which has been in the market for sometime now, the fact that the concerns brought out by the author on the way we Indians have made breaking rules and laws, showing disrespect to others, showing distrust of fellow citizens, making a nuisance of ourselves in public, etc into an art - all ever relevant and eminently Indian elements, is enough reason to get this book reviewed in these pages, even if a trifle late.

How often have you tried obeying the traffic laws by stopping at a red light on a busy day, and found yourself being bamboozled by the vehicle behind because the driver is restless and wants to get on with it, even by beating the red light? How often have you wondered whether we Indians will ever realize our civic duties and responsibilities when you are attacked by a bucketful of confetti from the floor above, as you step out of your house, fresh from a bath, for a walk on a cool morning? Does it unsettle you that some people in the office think nothing about filching things like stationery - staplers, pens, erasers... and graduate to bigger things and finally land corruption bigtime?

These are the tendencies though not peculiar to Indians, definitely part of the psyche of the majority, which V Raghunathan has tried to capture and present to us, almost like holding a mirror to us to project what we are. But of course, you know all this. You have discussed this with your colleagues, friends and relatives endlessly and come to the conclusion that

nothing in India will change unless some drastic steps are put in place...

Don't you find it absurd, when Indians travel abroad, they are a picture of discipline and virtue. On their return to India, these very people wax eloquent about how clean the environs in Singapore are, how a misdirected spitting action can mean having to look the law in the eye there; or how in New York the good old Indian cabbie will wait at a crossing for even a single pedestrian to cross to the sidewalk etc. But, in the very next breath, you can hear the rumblings rising from the depths of the same gentleman's throat culminating in one resounding...yes, splash across the road! "Arrrrrrrghh" you say, and hide your face! Shades of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde here!!

These and many more tendencies on the part of the Indians are what constitute the book on Games Indians Play and make for interesting reading as page after page takes you through these very idiosyncracies studied by the author in the context of various concepts like the Game Theory and the Prisoner's Dilemma. The attempt therefore, is to take a scientific and analytical look at what constitutes the Indians' curious behaviour. It is not just a case of behaviour, but something deeper, a case of habit getting into the psyche. For example, why do Indians suffer from the 'crabs in the bucket' syndrome? From individuals to public servants, we can see how the success of one leads to heartburning of various degrees in the other

with all out efforts to dislodge or atleast derail the progress of the former, being the unwritten rule . The common good is a distant virtue for most of us; in fact erosion of the universally accepted values of merit, fairplay, efficiency and sensitivity to others is the law. Thus we find that if we are unable to ascend to the higher levels of achievement, we are more than equal to the task of bringing down the standards to our levels of non-achievement - our system of reservations, putting caste on a premium is cited by the author as an example, or the insistence on Foreign Universities wishing to enter India to dilute their own standards to suit our mediocre capabilities.

While the book serves the purpose of letting us Indians see ourselves as we are, one would have liked to be told what, if at all, can change this behaviour pattern and instill some pride in our work, and our country, concern for our neighbours and the neighbourhood, and above all bring in some commitment to the cause of universal progress among Indians. Does India move on the right track only at the crack of a whip? Many quote the Emergency as an example. Is the reformation of our psyche possible only with a change in the system - of governance, constitution, or political climate? Or is it more personal and individualized leading to a collective whole of degenerative existence among us? Is our political leadership totally devoid of values and standards which we can quote to our children as the Eternal and Only truth we need? Poor implementation of laws? Role models no longer exist who can inspire the coming generations? These are some of the remedies that one would have liked the author to examine and suggest to an audience that is hurtling towards a state of Collective Cynicism. One believes that for India to progress, as in charity, one must begin with oneself. And it does not look like

we have enough of an incentive or disincentive to think rationally and achieve - never mind that the incentive could come from an individual, a politician or the government of the day. India is in urgent need of something that can lift us from the morass so clearly identified by V Raghunathan.

The book is a very systematic expose' of our weaknesses and the author has taken pains to study these in as scientific and clear terms as only someone with a deeply analytical mind could have attempted. That the book has the blessings of no less a person than the First Businessman of India, namely, N. R. Narayana Murthy is itself a validation of the hard work that has gone into the making of the tome.

P. G. Vijairaghavan

EXCERPTS

PUBLIC HYGIENE AND US...

As nationals of the world's largest democracy, we would like India to have a permanent seat on the Security Council of the United Nations. We would like India to be taken seriously by the world as a country of one billion. We would like foreign direct investors to throng in. We want India to be a major international tourist (including what we call health-tourism) and information technology destination. Yet, we see no inconsistency of these aspirations vis-à-vis keeping the country carpeted with garbage and filth. What is more, we see no irony in our posturing before the world as a representative of a morally superior culture. We see no ignominy in accepting the state of our towns and cities, perennially tottering on the verge of epidemics. Our tolerance towards using the streets as toilets goes to show that we see little shame in accepting that people can live without basic dignity.

In fact, at a national level, we do not even recognize our public hygiene habits or disorderliness as a problem. We read of the Singapore President, S.R. Nathan, exhorting his people to keep their toilets clean, as if they were not already in the cleanest country in the world. Clean toilets were also the concern of a renowned management thinker, Frederick Herzberg, of the Herzberg's Hygiene Factor fame. In India, nobody except of course Mahatma Gandhi, seems to have thought it seriously worthwhile to address the issue of our national sanitation.

Forget the dismal state of our public urinals, even the national carrier is occasionally known to suffer from toilet bowels brimming over mid-flight. Clearly, this has nothing to do with our poverty, or lack of resources or the economic status of the users. It is our defect-defect behaviour and utter lack of self-regulation.

LACK OF SELF-REGULATION

Why is our sense of public hygiene and aesthetics so abysmal? In all the cases just mentioned, lack of self-regulation plays as much a part as lack of regulation. Unfortunately, self-regulation does not appear to be our strong suit.

For example, take our traffic. Why is it always in a shambles? The reasons are several. To begin with, we are a nation that regards traffic signals with contempt and will not voluntarily obey the signals until we are forced to. To make matters worse, we have very few traffic signals. Most smaller roads, even in big cities, often have no traffic lights. And more often than not, the signals do not function properly, thus eroding public respect for them even further. As a consequence a red signal is hardly a cue to

stop or a zebra crossing hardly a reminder to slow down for the pedestrian.

Even if there is an attempt at enforcing traffic rules, we disregard it except when the enforcement process is very physical. Every noticed how, during peak hours, the Mumbai police use rope cordons to hold pedestrians at bay before the traffic lights clear? Or on occasion how constables have to stand in front of the lead vehicle to keep the entire rank of vehicles behind it at bay, till traffic from the other direction clears? Have you observed how frequently we do not stop our vehicles for even a minute to allow an ageing pedestrian or a child to cross the road? Left to ourselves, we are inconsiderate and uncaring.

THE WAY WE ARE

Our lack of self-regulation has serious implications. Our Constitution, at the time of its conception and drafting, contemplated a democracy where the government was meant to serve the people. To achieve this government was to be divided into three branches - legislature, judiciary and the executive-with each branch being able to supervise and regulate the other two. This was intended to be a system of checks and balances. In India, increasingly, each of these branches is striving to act in isolation, free from the influence or control of the other two. Often this leads to a situation where the judiciary begins to play an active role. Once an issue is viewed as 'parliament versus judiciary', it provides leeway for various people to disregard the directions even of the highest court of the country. Only a few months ago, the supreme court had to order the eviction of a Governor of the state from a house that he was occupying in Delhi! The same Governor was also severely indicted by the Supreme Court for misleading the executive about the

condition of polity in his State. According to new reports, rather than stepping down in a dignified manner, the Governor announced his intentions to 'take the salute' on Republic Day as the head of the State. In short, given the virtual non-existence of self-regulation among us as a people and given that it is people like us who populate each one of these three branches, there is bound to be an effect on the institutions as well. There is little surprise that the quality of our polity, bureaucracy and judiciary has declined.

I said earlier that our intelligence level is perhaps second to none in the world. Why then do we seem to lack self-regulation more than most other people in the world? Why are we reluctant to punish the unfair?

What prevents us from seeing that, even if we are supremely selfish, it is in our best interest to cooperate? Let me hypothesize a couple of answers to these questions.

Firstly, as we ourselves are unfair to varying degrees it does not shock us when we encounter unfairness in others. This is apparent in the Indian response patterns to some of the questions relating to fairness and unfairness discussed earlier.

Secondly, there is little doubt that we are far more quick-witted than most others the world over. But our intelligence seems to be in the nature of rapid-fire intelligence, like that required in a rapid-chess tournament! For example, it is obvious to the rapid-thinking Indian corporates that it is not worthwhile to invest in research and development (R & D). Let someone else develop the product and it can always be copied. They earn some quick temptation

points when they steer clear of such 'pointless' expenses as R & D except when it comes to claiming 100 per cent depreciation benefits for air conditioners and such in the R&D centres. As a consequence, in the long haul, our corporates are rarely world class and are not half as smart as they look in the short haul.

But intelligence isn't all about quick returns. For well-functioning societies, the intelligence required among people is the kind required in standard chess, which calls for thinking two, three or even more levels beyond, and not the kind required in lightning chess, where one barely gets to think one move ahead. Thus enlightened societies need to think of self-interest on the secondary, tertiary or even higher Planes and not as instant gratification. One not only needs to strategize one's won game plan several moves ahead but one also needs to anticipate others' moves ahead to each one of one's won, by putting oneself in the other's shoes. This we invariably fail to do.

HOW MUCH DO WE FREE RIDE?

The enormous size of our bureaucracy and the concomitant anonymity offer the most conducive environment for free riding. No wonder we see a horde of government employees idling, knitting, chatting or free riding their time away in any number of government departments. What little work gets done in such departments is done by a very small minority of workers, and the overall efficiency and effectiveness of our governmental system remain abysmally poor.

A smaller, hierarchical organization probably reduces the extent of free riding in

a system. It is not surprising then that in the smaller private-sector organizations we see relatively less free riding.

The reasons are simple. In a vast governmental bureaucracy, the fear of being caught free riding is very low. Hence the greed to benefit as much as possible is very high. In a smaller, private organization, the reverse is true, and hence free riding is much less.

A large organization, even when hierarchical, is more or less flat at any given level as each has a huge number of employees, thereby being conducive for free riding. Typically, this is not the case with smaller private organizations.

FROM FREE RIDING TO CORRUPTION

From free riding to corruption is but one step. As the probability of discovery goes down and greed increases constantly, the tendency to free ride graduates to corruption. Little wonder we rank among the most corrupt countries in the world in most world surveys. Some estimates put the proportion of graft in government contracts between 30 and 40 per cent.

Corruption is so widespread in every aspect of the bureaucracy and so specialized that there is a whole book on the manipulation of transfers by Indian bureaucrats. The world-renowned Hoover Institution has essay on India, 'India: Asia's Next tiger?' by Hilton L. Root on their website, which is indeed insightful: Root writes:

Where departments allocate licenses, subsidize goods, or raise money by black market sales (i.e., transport, public health, civil supplies, the development authority for land and projects), posts can command a good price. Power over postings, therefore, is a key to understanding corruption.

Of late there has been much excitement among the masses regarding the bold sting operations by some TV channels, exposing some government officials and politicians accepting bribes. But then, exceptions apart, being caught on the tape can hardly jeopardize one's job or career , if one is resolute and can find someone else to bribe suitably.

