Editorial: If India's So Great, Why is She So Poor?
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That heckler's challenge has an answer, and--impassioned evangelical exhortations aside--it's not because God is punishing the heathens. In fact, some think He may have it in for the rich. Those who know them well describe the really rich as a lonely, fear-bound breed, defensively walled away from the less-endowed world, seldom profoundly spiritual, rarely free to do as they please, more captives of their shekels than captains of their ship. Sure, there are exceptions, important ones. But they just prove the rule. The British author who offered this acerbic assessment was probably not in a high tax bracket: "If you would look at what the Lord God thinks of money, you have only to look at those to whom He gives it."

India's material shortcomings were tangentially brushed against in Washington DC, at the August Global Vision 2000 gathering of 10,000 Hindus, reported fully in this issue. But in those sessions no real answer was forthcoming, just some muttering about how Indians are too mild and meek. We need better answers to this recurring criticism of India's poverty. Three are provided below, and readers will have three hundred more.

The wealth of nations has moved, not unlike a contagious virus, from host to host down through the centuries. This month's health column on AIDS has provoked this paradigm, and if you find the model awkward, just remember that, like AIDS, wealth is frequently acquired by sleeping with someone who has it.

Three thousand years ago the Egyptians had a severe case of opulence. It bought them lots of trouble in the form of plunderers under whose invasions the empire succumbed. One by one other victims fell to the fatal fortunes of affluence. Between 2800 and 200 bce, wealth infected Mesopotamia, Assyria, Greece, Persia and Rome. All dead today, for wealth and power attract looters as naturally as carrion attracts vultures. The deadly bounty moved on to India and China, who suffered but

managed to survive, due to another kind of richness of which we will speak later.

Mexico and the Mayan empires arose in the early centuries of the Christian era, then fell as Arabian and European citadels were erected. In recent times the youthful US has enjoyed the lion's share of global provisions, and Japan and Korea are just sitting down at the table. The hyaenas and jackles are circling cautiously, nervously awaiting any opportunity to exploit the exploiters. And so it goes. Which brings us back to our question: If India is so great, why is she so poor?

Answer #1: The first response, drawn from the history just recounted, is painfully simple. India was plundered. Not once. Not even ten times. But continually and relentlessly for centuries. Before invasions began, India thrived on the varied resources that grace her hills and valleys. Water and good land, abundant flora and fauna made the subcontinent among the richest nations on earth. Then, as now, wealth did not go unnoticed. Hearing reports of a land filled with spices and silks, art and agriculture, cupiditous kings sent forth their armies. The Muslims came in 712 and dominated India between 1200 and 1750. The Portuguese, backed by superior sea power, came in the early 1500s, and set up shop in the East. Spain came next, superceded by the Dutch. In 1600 the British took their turn in the spice trade, starting with Bengal, then the richest province. The French could not resist coming to the party--staying a short time in the mid-1700s. European military superiority thus assembled in India quickly drove the Muslims aside, leaving the nation ultimately under British rule until 1947. Thus we have our answer. India's wealth was taken, violently and otherwise, and she has had less than fifty years to recover. She is no more to be blamed for material want than an innocent pedestrian is to be blamed for being mugged on the streets. Rather, sympathy should be shown, and blame placed with the thieves, not the victim or the victim's gentle manner.

Answer #2: Our second answer is that India is not as poor as the pundits have been preaching. The International Monetary Fund just recently ranked India the sixth wealthiest country in the world, based on Gross Domestic Product, adjusted for the currency's purchasing power inside the country. India is rich enough that Coca Cola has just won a battle to enter the market, after sixteen years of exile, and France's Peugeot is setting up to make 60,000 cars each year. India has the world's fourth largest standing army, complete with nuclear capability (not cheap, that one). She makes more sweet candied goodies than the rest of the world combined (now that's rich), and flaunts a film-making industry that desperately needs to go on a diet.

Sure, there are lots of people in India, and each one's share is far less than many places. But have you ever seen a simple village woman, frail and stooped with her years of carrying bricks in a basket on her head? Her clothes were tattered; her hair tussled and untied. Remember those two massive solid gold earrings, each the size of a plump pomegranate, dangling precariously on lobes stretched thin by the weight? Did you notice her proud carriage, her quick smile, her five children frolicking nearby? She lives in poverty, but can you really call her poor?

Answer #3: Our third answer is that, in the things that really matter, India is not poor at all, but as rich as any country and richer than most. Money can't buy you wealth. When the Vedas speak of wealth, artha, there is no mention of money, of stock portfolios, BMWs or beachfront property. Wealth, to the old sages, was a fat, lactating cow grazing in the compound, not lucre languishing abstractly in a bank's computer. Wealth, in their eyes, was ample rains and crops. Wealth is good water, clean air and food plucked from your own garden. Wealth is a sound body and mind. Wealth is cultural and social richness. Wealth is the extravagant beauties of art and architecture. Wealth is music and storytelling, and the time to listen to both. Wealth is having enough to help others, even a little. Wealth is hospitality and leisurely hours spent with family. Wealth is help from friends in times of need. Wealth is lack of debt and freedom from onerous obligations which burden senses and soul. Wealth is the right to participate in social processes and to be protected by just laws. Wealth is a job that supports the family without requiring wretched hours. Wealth is a home filled with happy kin, toiling together on things that matter to them. Wealth is living close to whatever one calls the Divine, being filled and thrilled with That more than with mundane matters. It is festival days off and celebrations of happy dance and abundant feasting. In all of the above, India is anything but poor.

Of course, money is another kind of wealth, not to be underestimated, and in this space in the months ahead we will explore some very Indian ways of getting (and staying) rich. Money can keep you warm in winter and well fed in all seasons. It can get you into politics or the country club and fulfill a desire for things, but it can never fill the human heart. It can't help you sleep at night. It can't make your grandma well. It can't give you knowledge or insight, or make you unselfish. It won't enlarge your ability to love. And it will never deepen your communion with the Divine or help you understand the mundane one iota better. So if you have money, don't count yourself rich too readily. And if you don't have it, look around--maybe you are more wealthy than you, or your banker, ever thought.